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THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS À KEMPIS

THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS À KEMPIS

BY

EBEN. J. IVES
Author of "The Ever-Present Christ," etc.

We may seem at times to comprehend and exhaust the helpfulness of the book; but let us go and *live* more, and then come back to it with our gathered experience, and lo! new depths and reaches of meaning that were invisible to our less tutored gaze.—GEORGE TYRRELL.

LONDON
STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT
32, RUSSELL SQUARE, W.C. 1
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To C. J. I.

WHOSE MOTHER AND MINE TAUGHT
ME TO READ
THE IMITATION

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CHAPTER I

FIRST PRINCIPLES

"Of these two influences—that of Reason and that of Living Example—which would a wise reformer reinforce? Christ chose the last. He gathered all men into a common relation to Himself, and demanded that each should set Him on a pedestal of his heart, giving a lower place to all other objects of worship, to father and mother, to husband or wife. In Him should the loyalty of all hearts centre; He should be their pattern, their Authority and Judge."—*Ecce Homo.*

"It is the work of a mind of extreme originality and power: and it is also the work of a very religious man: Thomas à Kempis had not a more solemn sense of things unseen and of what is meant by the Imitation of Christ."—DEAN CHURCH'S *Review of "Ecce Homo"* (1866).

THE world-famous little book called *The Imitation of Christ* opens with these words:

> "Whosoever followeth after Me walketh not in darkness, saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished to imitate His life and manners: if we would be truly enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart."

Here are the Christian's programme and problem, but how are they to be solved in actual

life? How can frail men and women achieve even a tolerable likeness to Jesus Christ? Did the earliest disciples do it? Has it ever been done? Was Professor Seeley right in the above extract in saying that Jesus deliberately adopted the principle of a Living Example as fundamental amongst His disciples? If we realize we cannot win a recognizable likeness to Jesus by our own efforts, what reinforcement of our nature is offered? This is our problem whenever we think of imitating the Example of Jesus. We shall see that though this wonderful little book raises the problem by its title, there is much more in it of another principle, without which imitation sinks into a vain effort and mocks by its futility. The book sets before us a great task, but suggests a way of accomplishment for the weakest.

The Example of Jesus is more than an appeal to admiration: it is an inspiration; but it is an inspiration which, whilst creating a sense of dissatisfaction and insufficiency, awakens also a great desire, which by the strengthening aid of the Holy Spirit can be embodied in action. It is the wonder of Jesus that He can renew men into His likeness. By fellowship with Him the moulding power is brought into play. By the Spirit He communicates He makes men like Himself. Or, put in another way, the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and reveals them to us, but such revelation is not fully known till it becomes incorporate in the life of the recipient. The acid test of Christianity is not what

we make of it but what it makes of us. We comment on the story in the Gospels, criticize its details, but slowly are forced to perceive that we ourselves are being criticized. Whatever their origin, however edited, there they are before us with the Supreme portrait of One in whom we discover, with Browning in *Christmas Eve*,

> Morality to the uttermost
> Supreme in Christ as we all confess.

And not morality only, but religion also. For in Him, whilst our conscience finds its Lord, our soul discovers its Lover and Saviour: we bow before Him and own in Him *the Way, the Truth, the Life*. Inevitably we find ourselves testing our lives by His, "whate'er our name or sign."

I.

Dr. Hort's statement that, "It was not as an Example but as a Master that Christ spellbound the Apostles"* is true only in a sense. Did He not spellbind them in both ways? Of His mastership over them there need be no question. But again and again the New Testament shows how His Example was one of the most powerful influences that acted upon them, so that His "life and manners" became the standard for their actions. And it shows, further, how Jesus Himself deliberately used

* *The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, p. 205.

the imitative instinct as every wise educationist does.

The personal influence of Jesus must have been at least like that of any great man. If an undergraduate could say of T. H. Green, "I never go to see Green without feeling I ought to be ashamed of myself, and, by Jove, I am ashamed of myself,"* would not the same be said of Jesus? If it can be said of Lord Haig that "he exhales such an atmosphere of honour, virtue, courage, and sympathy that one feels uplifted, as when one enters the Cathedral of Beauvais for the first time,"† did not Peter realize the same subtle influence in the Presence of Jesus? His disciples bowed before Him with that reverence and subjection of soul that upraise it too. He shamed them into a feeling of their littleness, and yet won them by His sympathy; by His selflessness He judged their selfishness, by His purity He condemned their lusts. His Example was the light that blackened every blot. The awe He excited by His power over disease and life became a deeper awe as they gained insight into His character. He was often "over their heads" in His instructions, but they seldom missed the truth when He translated His teaching into action and exhibited it in the terms of life. They were knit to Him with a passionate devotion, though they overestimated the strength of that devotion in the hour of trial. When His physical presence

* *Life of B. Jowett*, ii. 192.

† N. Lytton, *The Press and the General Staff*.

was withdrawn it became their ambition to *follow His footsteps** (1 Pet. ii. 21), to *walk as He walked*, live as He lived (1 John ii. 6). Such was the spell that His Example threw over them that they sought not to please themselves, since Christ pleased not Himself (Rom. xv. 2, 3, 7); to give alms with the "grace" with which He had given Himself (2 Cor. viii. 7-9); to forgive as He forgave (Eph. iv. 31 to v. 2); to be gentle and "sweetly reasonable" as His conduct had ever been (2 Cor. x. 1); to be humble and lowly in mind (Phil. ii. 5); to be as full of courage in witnessing to the truth as He was at Pilate's judgment-seat (1 Tim. vi. 13); to see in Him the *pioneer and the perfection of faith* (Heb. xii. 2); and to find in Him help and inspiration in the hour of temptation since He remained sinless though tempted (Heb. ii. 18, iv. 15). Paul indeed almost sums up their ambition in the words, *Copy me, as I copy Christ* (1 Cor. xi. 1). Though it is true that here Paul's eyes are fixed on the exalted Lord, since in the main, as Dr. Findlay says, "Paul's *imitatio Christi* turns on the great acts of Christ's redeeming work, rather than on the incidents of His earthly course."†

* Quotations throughout are either from R.V. or Dr. Moffatt's translation.

† *Expositor's Greek Testament, in loco*: cf. Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 171: "It may seem at first sight meaningless to say that Christ in His exaltation is to be included in the *imitatio Christi*: but is it so absurd when we think of it? The exalted Christ is through His Spirit the author and giver of our life as Christians, and the life He communicates is His own."

Yet if we are to understand Paul we must refuse the distinction often made between the historic Jesus and the exalted Christ. To Paul these words would mean little: it was the same Jesus whom he saw whether he looked upward or backward. And if at times his gaze was more upon the Risen Christ it was because Paul knew the intimate and invisible Presence as the very central core of that which made his life worth living. Paul lived a life in which Christ was both within and without. He was the living atmosphere in which Paul's heart breathed and existed.

But this way of following Jesus became more natural to the Apostles since they had received in Jesus the right of *being children of God*, and if children they perceived they were destined *to be like Him*, for He was the *first-born of a great brotherhood;* and by Him they were *to be transformed into the same likeness as Himself*. Till that likeness was attained they were immature, stunted in moral and spiritual stature, waiting till in common growth they grew to the *full measure of development which belongs to the fulness of Christ*. In them had the seed of Christ been sown, and being watered and nourished would some day burst into the glorious likeness (John i. 12; 1 John iii. 2; Rom. xii. 29; 2 Cor. iii. 18; Eph. iv. 13; John i. 19, 16; *cf.* 1 Cor. xv. 22, 47-49; Col. iii. 4; Gal. ii. 20). In very truth Christ was the ground and "original," as well as the archetype and prophecy, of their life. In Jesus they saw what human life could become;

they saw the richness and fulness and manifoldness of His life; they enlarged their conceptions of man's value and potentialities. Manhood became a new thing to them as they watched how He lived. He raised their ideals of human nature. Often other aspects of His work and task filled their whole horizon, when, for instance, they thought of Him as Messiah, or Saviour, or Lord; but though these and other aspects overshadowed His example they could not obliterate it. It remained full of inspiration and instruction, and was one of the many strands that bound them to their Master.

The Apostles followed Jesus by way of imitating Him since He taught them to do so. When He called them to *follow* Him (Mark i. 17), He summoned them at first to a literal companionship; but the word deepened in significance, till it lost its literal meaning and became metaphorical. We can trace the change in Peter when we compare Mark i. 17 with John xvi. 37, xxi. 21; 1 Pet. ii. 21. First that which is natural, then that which is spiritual—such is the history of this word, *follow*, in the New Testament. When Jesus said, *Come unto Me . . . learn of Me* (Matt. xi. 28-29), He was suggesting a wider object-lesson than that of a calm, untroubled mind. Was it not the whole art of life? Do they not suggest a life of faith, of communion with a Heavenly Father, a realization of His abiding Presence, a conscience that can say, *I do always the things that please Him?* Is He not placing Himself before men as the

One who, having mastered the supreme secret of life, can show all how the art of life should be perfectly practised? Is He not like the gymnasium master who, when his boys have failed to carry out his verbal instructions, says to them, "Now let me show you how to do it"? The other words of Jesus, *I have been setting you an example* (John xiii. 14), are likewise pregnant with a fuller meaning than the primary lesson of humble service. They attach to themselves His words: *Just as the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many* (Matt. xx. 28); or *You are to love one another as I have loved you* (John xv. 12). In such words and others the Master taught His disciples to see in His life His motives, and in His actions an embodiment of His verbal teaching. It was teaching by the concrete, not by philosophical discourse nor homiletical instruction. Thus He taught by example, and appealed for imitation in the central things that shape conduct.*

But He is *the Way and the Truth and the Life*, and though by example His message is "good advice," yet because He is *the Life*, His message becomes "good news," a gospel indeed. He

* "A rational imitation of Christ is not the conduct of a mimic or a puppet. It means what the imitation of other characters means—an influence of leadership, power, authority, example, applied to the conditions of one's own life. The traits, in Him, which command appreciation are applied, not to suppress one's own character, but to enrich and ennoble it."—PEABODY: *Jesus Christ and Christian Character*, p. 39.

used every agency in teaching which was open to Him that He might win men from their life of sin, of alienation, of indifference, to a life of faith and love and hope, a life of which God was the alpha and omega, a life in which He Himself was central because He and the Father are one.

II.

Dr. John Oman in his virile book, *Grace and Personality*, has subjected the principle of imitation to some strong criticism. He will only allow that the example of Jesus can serve as an inspiration, succouring "the faith which sees love to be life's final meaning and last word of power"; though he allows that "in a state of pupilage, pattern is much more than precept and much longer than profit."* He rejects imitation since it seems to necessitate rules of conduct or requires an encyclopædic knowledge of Jesus such as we can never possess, and thus injures moral freedom and proves impossible in the long run. But Dr. Oman is thinking of an external copying of the life of Jesus such as the Apostles never sought nor the *Imitation* set before its readers. The imitative instinct is of course present in all hero-worship, and plays a great part in the acquisition of experience. Response to the suggestiveness of a great character is a real factor in most men and women, and it lasts long after our childish heroes and heroines have ceased to charm and

* pp. 249–252.

allure us. But surely it has a meaning deeper than mere copying when we think of Jesus. There is an imitation of His "life and manners" that at once commends itself to the conscience which need have in it none of the "blind copying" that Dr. Oman rejects. Surely it is possible to maintain our moral freedom even whilst we see in Christ the supreme Pattern of life, and seek to follow in His steps.

We are not concerned with the theoretical place that example may or may not have in morals. Practically it is a help to know that, as Epictetus or Plutarch said, we have a type to judge by and to ask ourselves how Socrates, or any other wise man, would act in our circumstances. It has, of course, many perils: our imaginative repicturing of our chosen examples may be faulty, our insight into the motives that moved them may be dim and uncertain; but, on the other hand, it is frequently a guide. And John Stuart Mill's famous adaptation of this principle to Jesus has a real value to us if we use it carefully and with discretion. Perhaps the negative side of the question is the more helpful use of the method; for instance, how often we say to ourselves, "Oh, Jesus would never have done or said that!" In this way our conscience receives enlightenment, and Jesus becomes to us a Second Conscience, since He never once failed to follow right and truth and beauty. Its fundamental peril would appear to be that it stresses the external rather than the

inner life and makes life work from without rather than from within.

The greatest experiment in the imitation of Jesus was, of course, the work of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), whose story has endless charm. He has been aptly called "half angel and half nightingale." The fresh study of his life and movement in our day is to be welcomed for many reasons. There is a spring-like glamour, a sweet simplicity, an abandonment, a love, a joyousness that make an instant appeal. He was a "standard-bearer of mediæval saintliness," along with *The Imitation*. His limitations were chiefly those of his age. Born to a wealthy inheritance, Francis heard the call of Jesus to go forth "naked to follow the naked Jesus," and to reproduce as close a copy of his Master as he could. Because Jesus was poor, Francis espoused "Lady Poverty"; because Jesus was never married, Francis vowed himself to celibacy; because Jesus was obedient unto death, Francis laid himself upon the altar of obedience to the chief representative of religion in his day, the Pope; because Jesus touched the leper, Francis, as a good soldier of Jesus, kissed one; because Jesus' body was marked with scars, Francis sought to have the stigmata upon his own hands and feet. Francis imposed on his disciples the threefold vow—poverty, chastity, obedience; his example proved contagious, and he soon gathered a large following, for he practised the message of gentle love which he preached. He was "the very antithesis of the

sour Puritan. He was the most joyous of saints, would have no sad, long faces about him. . . . His friars were to be *joculatores Dei* ('the minstrels of God'). . . . Indeed, the mediæval evangelists were the analogue of the modern Salvationist."* His love was ardent alike for God, for his neighbour, for the poor, for the whole creation—sun, moon, birds, beasts. He had caught alike the Master's breadth of love and His deep joyousness of heart. He sought to keep the example of "a direct following of Christ before the eyes of the world as a continuous living spectacle," in a world before which Christianity was distorted by a paganized and secularized clergy, so that Harnack can say: "What the watchword 'poverty' denoted was an immense step of advance from dead faith, and from a barren service of ceremonies and works to spiritual freedom in religion, and to an earnest personal Christianity."† It is not clear if Francis had any contact with the Waldenses, "the poor men of Lyons," who, a generation

* Okey, *Little Flowers* (Everyman ed.), xviii. It is hard to kill the tradition of sourness attached to Puritanism. It was not sour or lacking in humour; cf. "On his way to Dunbar Cromwell laughed heartily at the sight of one soldier overturning a full cream-tub and slamming it down on the head of another, whilst on his return from Worcester he spent a day hawking in the fields near Aylesbury. 'Oliver,' we hear, 'loved an innocent jest'" (Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate*, ii. 83). Was Milton or was Bunyan sour?

† *Hist. of Dog.*, vi. 93.

earlier, had taken similar vows of poverty and evangelism under the inspiration of Peter Waldo; but anyhow, Francis and his followers represent "the Christianity of imitation at its very best . . . an all-round thing—loving, attractive, strong, serviceable, joyous," and "no wooden way of following Christ's example." But Francis himself found that his own methods were not capable of universal adoption, and so he formed an order of Tertiaries—men and women who did not forsake their secular callings or properties or families, but sought to serve God in them. It is the tragedy of the movement that other forces quickly stirred within it, and the single-mindedness, the purity of Francis himself were diluted with less pure currents. It was welcomed by the Church and altered till the latter Franciscans were followers of Francis in little better than name. But was it true imitation of Jesus? Were the stern self-discipline, the penitential austerities of Francis, the monastic temper in much of his work—were these the marks of the perfect imitator? To point to these and other things is simply to show that, great genius as Francis was in discovering spiritual things, he did not rise above the age in which he lived. But it seems ungrateful to record any verdict against the magnificent protest and confession that Francis made on his Master's behalf; for he knew something of the depth of redeeming love, and it washed his heart from selfishness.

Everyone who reads his story will find in it

inspiration to copy him as he copied Christ, though the methods may be utterly diverse in outward expression. Every lover of Jesus learns something from everyone who loves and serves the same Lord. It may seem to many that St. Francis misunderstood Jesus, but if we claim to know Him better, how much greater becomes the appeal for loyalty to the Lord of us all, who never denies His Presence to the simple and sincere heart, however mistaken some of its notions or practices may be.*

III.

Writers of the Evangelical School have tended to disparage the idea of imitating Jesus because the principle seems to ignore the great watch-words of the Reformation, which took a very different form of outward expression from that

* "Frank Crossley was a nineteenth-century saint whom Francis of Assisi might have recognized as a brother in faith and spirit. . . . That life—beautiful in its unworldliness, its faithfulness to conscience, its unstinted liberality, and its self-oblivion. To many it brought inspiration and grave questionings as to their own duty as Christians. . . . Surely the present type of Christians need few things more than to be brought face to face with a life which was one long endeavour to make Christian principles realities, and to follow them, and the Christ who is assumed to be our pattern, wherever they led, no matter how 'odd' or how hard the resulting course might be."—Dr. Alex. Maclaren's Introduction to *Life of F. W. Crossley*, v.; *cf.* "All natural imitativeness is supernaturally magnified at the sight of the all-lovely Lord" (*F. W. Crossley*, p. 222).

of the mediæval standards. They disparage it in the main because it seems to put ethics before religion, imitation before regeneration, the Incarnation before the Cross. In the New Testament the two are joined, or it is obvious that Christian conduct must spring from a heart in which Jesus is enthroned as Lord if conduct is to be according to His standard. Else we have sham imitation, mere copying in which the spirit is dead.

We find, if we search the Apostolic writings, that whilst they sought to follow the Example, they also sought renewal of the whole inner life; first His Presence, then that Presence subduing and colouring all within. The earliest Christians felt the influence of Jesus upon their lives, flowing into them as they contemplated His life and words. His Example shed its radiance upon them as it has done upon all men who have known anything of Him. He has been, as Lecky says, "an enduring principle of regeneration." "Blessed influence of one true loving soul on another! not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf and glowing tasselled flower."* For every life has beneficent influences according to the measure of its goodness. "Every life," as Amiel in his *Journal* says, "is a profession of faith, and exercises an inevitable and silent propaganda."†

* G. Eliot, *Scenes from Clerical Life*. † p. 24.

But to explain how the Example of Jesus does its vast work upon the hearts of men by influence is not to open up the New Testament secret. That secret lies in the use the Spirit of God makes of this subtle, intangible power that one man has over another. The Apostles felt the influence, but they experienced something in addition. Such expressions as these imply far more: *All of you who had yourselves baptized into Christ have taken on the character of Christ* (Gal. iii. 27); *Put on the character of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Rom. xiii. 14); *We all mirror the glory of the Lord with face unveiled, and so are being transformed into the same likeness as Himself, passing from one glory to another—for this comes from the Lord the Spirit* (2 Cor. iii. 18); *Till Christ be formed within you* (Gal. iv. 19). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to take of the things of Christ and make them vivid realities to us, to make Jesus a power within the heart, to unveil His Presence within as something which renews, changes, produces a new set of desires overcoming and destroying the tendencies to evil. Whatever Jesus does for men He does by the Spirit. In our co-operation with the Divine Spirit we grow into that Divine likeness and resemblance; we assimilate the character of Jesus. From the human point of view we may call it influence or imitation; from the Divine point of view it is the work of grace within our hearts, the gift of the Holy Spirit. This does not degrade a Divine operation to a merely human task under another name, but we see how

the inter-relationships of God and man, as well as of man with man, are in reality all of God. What we conceive of as human is in truth Divine.

We assimilate the Spirit by opening the heart, yielding up the desires and ambitions of life to Him, entering into communion and co-operation with His work in the world; and there comes to us "a life of progressive identification —of the present consciousness and character— with the character and will and being of Christ, who is God."* To behold *the glory of the Lord*, to *put on Christ*, to have *Christ formed within*, is to be pledged to *follow* Him and *walk as He walked*. We see in Christ as in a mirror the destiny awaiting us—He is the *Omega*, the last letter in life's alphabet to us; but He is this because He is also the *Alpha*, the first. We are truly only our real selves as we fulfil all the potentialities within us, the most wonderful being this, that Christ is "the light that lighteth every man, coming into the world." For the development of the first into the last we have the power of imitation, of assimilation, of co-operation with the Holy Spirit, who is none other than the Lord Himself. When the prodigal *came to himself* he left behind his false, unnatural self, the self of worldliness and sin and selfishness, and in realizing himself he found himself in his father's home and love. The popularity and usefulness of *The Imitation of Christ* lies just here, that it embodies the prin-

* Moberly, *Atonement and Personality*, p. 274; cf. also Illingworth, *Christian Character*, p. 37.

ciples thus briefly enumerated. It does not propose a mere literal copying, but brings its readers into the very Presence of Christ, and quickly passes away from following to fellowship with Christ, a fellowship which transforms the hidden springs of life, turning bitter waters into sweet, foulness into purity, and death into life.

It is a fellowship in which there is a communication of life. In the Incarnate Saviour we see the life working to its vast issues, and as we receive such a life we know also that the laws of that life are the laws which will regulate our own life as that life flows into us. The watchword of the Reformation, *Christ for us*, needs for its full perfection another—*Christ in us*. He is our Lawgiver and our Saviour—nay, our Life. Without both of these elements Christianity is shorn of its strength. Men need a Bethlehem and a Calvary within as well as without them. Bethlehem does not reveal its eternal significance till Christ has a manger in our hearts; Calvary does not suffice till there is a cross within; Easter is not a memory: it is an experience.

Though Christ our Lord a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
And not in thee, thy soul remains eternally forlorn.
The Cross on Calvary can never save thee from thy sin,
Unless it is upraised again thy very soul within.
Our Lord is risen from the dead! What good is that to thee
So long as thou remainest dead in sin and misery?

CHAPTER II

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST": AUTHORSHIP AND THOMAS À KEMPIS

"The *Imitatio Christi* kindles independent religious life and a fire which burns with a flame of its own."—HARNACK: *What is Christianity?* p. 270.

IT is claimed sometimes that next to the Bible *The Imitation of Christ* is the most popular book of devotion in the world. Though *Pilgrim's Progress* probably runs it close for circulation, the picture of Giant Pope will probably hinder it in Roman Catholic circles. But *The Imitation* has a free course in every communion, has had a longer history by two and a half centuries than the *Pilgrim*, has been translated into most of the languages of the world, and has been treasured everywhere as of exceptional service for spiritual nutriment. As Samuel Johnson said to Boswell, "*Thomas à Kempis* must be a good book, as the world has opened its arms to receive it." This was in 1778, and the world has not closed its arms yet. Twenty-eight years before this was said John Wesley had recorded of his early Methodist Fellowship groups: "The societies are not half supplied with books, not even with à Kempis—which ought to be in every

house." Wesley himself published many editions —one, it may be noticed, in Latin for the boys of Kingswood School, which he had founded. John Woolman, the American Quaker, and contemporary of both Johnson and Wesley, and engaged in very different work for the Kingdom of God, entered in his *Journal*, 1757: "I have been informed that Thomas à Kempis lived and died in the profession of the Roman Catholic religion; and, in reading his writings, I have believed him to be a man of true Christian spirit, as fully as many who died martyrs because they could not join with some superstitions in that Church. All true Christians are of the same spirit, but their gifts are diverse, Jesus Christ appointing to each one his peculiar office agreeably to His infinite wisdom." It would be easy to cull other quotations and multiply those given by Mr. Montmorency in his *Thomas à Kempis* or by Dr. C. Bigg in his Introduction to *The Imitation*. In the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, the book was a favourite form of devotional reading, from George Eliot's famous description in *The Mill on the Floss*, that "it works miracles," to Matthew Arnold's "The most exquisite document after those of the New Testament of all that the Christian spirit has inspired"; from Gladstone's description of it as a "golden book" for hours of sorrow, to Gordon's use of it; from Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Free Churchmen, and Quakers to Tolstoi in his masterpiece, *War and Peace*, where Pierre, after his introduction to Freemasonry,

went to Petersburg and, informing no one of his presence, "actually spent whole days in reading Thomas à Kempis, which someone—he knew not who—had given him. One thing, and one thing only, Pierre understood in reading that book: that was the hitherto unknown delight in believing in the possibility of attaining perfection, and in the possibility of active brotherly love among men"; to *The Saint* of Fogazzaro, where the hero's supreme crisis lies expressed in a prayer from *The Imitation,* when he makes his renunciation.

A book which thus has won a universal suffrage rouses interest in its authorship, its author, its contents and message. A volume might easily be filled with an account of the editions, and books about it. We can but indicate something of these here.

I.

The authorship presents a pretty problem in higher criticism, for it has been claimed for others than Thomas à Kempis. The problem deals with unsigned and signed MSS., with editions printed, with traditions held differently in Belgium, in France, in England, and in Germany. The main points in these debates have been very briefly set out by Mr. Montmorency in his valuable *Thomas à Kempis, His Age and Book* (1906). But it is to be wished that every writer on the

subject had taken to heart a sentence in Book I. v.:

> Let not the authority of the writer move thee, whether he be of small or great learning; but let the pure love of truth draw thee to read. Search not who said this, but mark what is said.

Much ink and paper would have been saved if this had been heeded. Yet no surprise need be felt seeing that the author borrowed from St. Bernard the motto—

> Love to be unknown and to be little esteemed (I. II.).

The author seems to have been frankly indifferent about any fame to be won by this fourfold pamphlet on aspects of spiritual devotion, and did not sign any MS. as the true and only author.

Renan, in a well-known essay in his *Leaders of Christian and Anti-Christian Thought*, claims the authorship for Italy in the person of the Abbé of St. Etienne of Verceil, named Gersen, or Gesen, in the thirteenth century; his main reason being that he finds in the book internal evidence to fit in with the age. But no one has followed his lead, and his positive evidence amounts to *nil*. Far more can be said for John Gerson (1363-1423), whose date fits in with the first circulation of the little MSS., and amongst whose writings copies of part of *The Imitation* have been found. He was Chancellor

of the University of Paris, a leading scholar, an enthusiastic educationist, a great orator; he took a large share in the Council of Constance, at which his side was so completely defeated that he fled disguised as a pilgrim and lived henceforth in retirement, first at the Monastery of Moelch and later on at the Celestine Monastery of Lyons, where he opened classes for boys. Mr. Montmorency publishes an extract from his tracts, and after a thorough examination rejects the claims on his behalf. The atmosphere of *The Imitation* is so different from ecclesiastical strife, and Gerson's style in his known writings is so scholarly, that when we consider how easily an anonymous treatise could be incorporated to increase the fame of his monastery or his order, and that he was never a monk, whilst the cowl of the monk shadows the book, one feels that the verdict is against him.

There is a somewhat uncertain claim made for the Englishman, Walter Hylton, in an edition called *The Christian Pattern, or the Imitation of Jesus Christ* (1707), in which the editor denies the authorship to T. à Kempis, and claims it for the "chanon and governaire of the house of Thurgaton, biside Newark." Hylton, or Hilton, was a mystic and the author of *The Ladder of Perfection.* Amongst his recognized MSS. is a tract called *De Musica Ecclesiastica,* which is composed of three parts of *The Imitation.* Hylton died in 1395 or 1396. That some copyist found the tracts on the Continent after 1420, copied them, and added them to Hylton's

other writings, seems easier to believe than that Thomas à Kempis knew English and translated what he found into Latin. Anyhow, the claim lacks other substantial proof, and presents us with a curious study in religious authorship, but it cannot hold itself against the more certain claims of à Kempis.

Probably, except for these claimants, Thomas Hammerlein of Kempen, or à Kempis, as he is commonly styled, would universally have been reckoned as the author. The internal evidence from comparison with his other writings is convincing, the parallelism of thought is striking, all we know about him is confirmatory, and what MS. evidence exists is in his favour. In the Royal Library, Brussels, there are—or were—some of his autographic writings. One is the copy of the whole Bible in the Vulgate, which occupied him fifteen years, 1425-1440. Another is a small volume of 192 pages, interleaved irregularly with vellum, containing all four parts of *The Imitation* and actually signed as written by Thomas. It is dated 1441. There is also another MS. of the first three books, not written by him, but attested thus: "Let it be observed that this treatise has been composed by a pious and learned man, Master Thomas of Mount St. Agnes and Canon Regular of Utrecht, called Thomas à Kempis. It has been copied from the manuscript of the author in the year 1425."

One curious point about some of the Brussels MSS. is that one of them is called *Musica Ecclesiastica*, the very name given to it in the

Hylton MSS. at Zion House. But more of this later on. The life of Thomas has been known for long, in part from his own book, *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, where he was a monk for the most of his long life, and also from lives of him written by contemporaries after his death. His styles of thought and devotion are known from many other treatises, sermons, and hymns which are always accounted as his. In fact, nearly everything points to him, though there are points of obscurity which probably now will never be cleared up.

II.

Thomas Hammerlein of Kempen has found many biographers, and the writers have varied in treatment according as they were Roman Catholic or Protestant. He himself wrote sketches of the originators of the movement in which he took a part, and also of his contemporaries, in two volumes, *The Founders of the New Devotion* and *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes;* into these he has put slight references to his own contact with the men about whom he wrote. Shortly after his death his own biography was written by Busch. The Roman Catholic lives usually contain visions, legends, and adornments assigned by that Church to her saints and confessors. In Kettlewell's two stout volumes there are copious extracts and a full account of the monastic order to which à Kempis belonged, *The Brethren of the Common*

Life ; whilst in Mr. Montmorency's book we have the latest and best account of all, being most critical, useful, and full of interest.

The *New Devotion* movement, as it is sometimes called, which consolidated itself into an order, *The Brothers of the Common Life*, sprang from the striking conversion of Gerard Groot, or the Great (1340-1384), as Methodism sprang out of John Wesley's conversion three centuries later. The parallel between these two men is close: both were University men and turned to the common people for their evangelism. Gerard, after taking his degree in Paris, became a popular teacher, and after his conversion consecrated his gifts to witnessing for Christ, quickly gaining success as a preacher. In order to give stability to his converts he formed them into fellowship groups, just as George Fox or Wesley did in later days. He was a book-lover like Wesley; his chief masters were Augustine and Bernard, and he was a close student of the Scriptures; à Kempis, in the brief biography he wrote of Gerard, quotes a saying of his: " I am covetous, yea, more than covetous, of books, and if I lack them I am nothing "—a saying that went straight to the heart of a man who loved to have a " little book in a little nook." He travelled to preach in the chief cities of Holland; at Amsterdam he is said to have used the mother-tongue of the people in his sermon for the first time. He visited Ruysbroeck, the great mystic, at Grünthal, near Brussels, and came away " as it were a purified creature," having written down

some of the mystic's great sayings lest they should be forgotten. This is to be noted, for it shows how the movement he originated is linked with the mystics of an earlier generation, such as Tauler, Suso, and others, and through them with Eckhart, who is a great "watershed" personality in the history of mysticism.

The converts were grouped into communities, called Brother-Houses and Sister-Houses; here they cultivated their souls, watched over one another, and, by way of maintenance, were employed chiefly in copying MSS., for it was in the age just before printing was invented. Gerard died before the first monastery of his movement had been built at Windesheim, under the guidance of Florentius Radewyn, his immediate successor, who was Thomas à Kempis' "sweet master." An offshoot of this monastery was another at Mount St. Agnes at Zwolle near the Zuyder Zee, where Thomas spent his days. So well organized for both devotion and practical life were these communities that Luther, who had no great love for monasteries, said: "Would God that all convents were like the Brother-Houses!" The movement was a kind of overture for the Reformation in that it was an attempt to revive vital and experimental religion strictly within the borders of the Roman Church. It passed slowly away as MS. copying languished when printing was invented about 1440, but its imperishable monument is in the book, *The Imitation*

of Christ, which was written between 1420 and 1425.

Florentius Radewyn followed Gerard Groot as head of the *New Devotion*, and was in charge at Deventer when Thomas, aged thirteen, first met him. It was there that, Thomas says, "I learnt to write," and he lived there for seven years; in 1399 he was sent to Mount St. Agnes, where his brother was Prior, and he remained there till 1471, when he passed to the beatific vision of the Lord he loved. Mr. Kettlewell describes the situation of the monastery as "pleasant and healthy. A fine, genial, bracing air wafted softly across the downs" when he visited the place.

The life was monastic; in his own cell Thomas à Kempis had his longest journeys and his most perilous voyages. He fulfilled such labours as fell to his share: he wrote, he copied MSS., he instructed the novices, he kept the hours of prayer and meditation. Only twice did he leave the monastery: once when all the monks were under a ban of ecclesiastical censure, and once to visit his dying brother. In 1414 he was ordained Priest, and we have a sketch of his priestly ideals in Book III. v. For a time he was Procurator, and at another time Sub-prior. Of his books some forty survive, though only a few have been translated into English. He appears to have lived in happy relations with the rest of the community, though he would often slip away saying that he had Someone waiting for him in his cell. Like

Gerard, like all good men, he was a great book-lover, and one of his earliest biographers quotes the famous saying of his:

> In many things have I sought for rest and have found it not except in little nooks and little books (*nisi in Hoexkens ende Boexkens*).

Doubtless he observed his own precept:

> Never be idle or vacant, be always reading or writing or praying or meditating or employed in some useful labour for the common good (I. xix.).

Tolensis, in a Preface to Sommalius' edition of à Kempis' works, notes some characteristics, in the manner of biographers of that day: "His endurance in bearing adversities; his patience, not only equally tolerating the vices of other men, but in kindly excusing them; of his sobriety, chastity, modesty, application, and earnestness throughout life; of his promoting the interests of the Brethren and of the Common House; of his providing Divine exercises, and such other things as would add more ornament and splendour to the decency and decorum of the sanctuary; of his assiduity in prayer, his burning zeal and frequent profusion of tears." Principal Lindsay has etched this portrait: "We see a real man, but a man helpless anywhere save in the study or in the convent—a little fresh-coloured man, with soft brown eyes, who had the habit of stealing away to his cubi-

culum whenever the conversation became too lively; somewhat bent, for it is on record that he stood upright when the Psalms were chanted, and even rose on his tiptoes with his face turned upwards; genial, if shy, and occasionally given to punning, as when he said he preferred a Psalm to Salmones—a man who perhaps led the most placid, uneventful life of all men who ever wrote a book or scribbled letters."*

When we compare this "most placid, uneventful life" with the very disturbed and eventful times in which our author lived, as we may do by glancing at a table at the end of this chapter, we see at once the value and defect of the monastic ideal he followed and mark one of the failures of *The Imitation* to give a full-orbed presentation of the Christian life. He lived as a man might if he dwelt in some church off Cheapside or the Strand or Piccadilly, untouched by the fashions, deaf to the voices, blind to all the changing sights of the worlds of business and pleasure and politics. If, noting all this, we impatiently cry with Robert Louis Stevenson—

> And ye, O brethren, what if God,
> When from Heav'n's top He spies abroad,
> And sees on this tormented stage
> The noble war of mankind rage:
> What if His vivifying eye,
> O monks, should pass your corner by? †

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* *Ency. Brit.*, "Thomas à Kempis."
† *Our Lady of the Snows.*

we must remember that the life of contemplation and prayer which these monks practised has great claims, and that monasteries have made valuable contributions to the world they despised. They renounced what we must seek to consecrate and use. The conception of the saintly life has been enlarged since those days, but at that period it was undoubtedly narrow, isolated, self-centred, seeking to save its own soul, forgetful of the souls of others. The modern vision of Jesus demands a wider interpretation of life's duties than that of the Mediæval Age, for to-day the spirit of Charles Wesley's words animates the Christian view of life—

In Jesus' name, behold, we meet,
Far from an evil world retreat,
And all its frantic ways:
One only thing resolved to know
And square our useful lives below
By reason and by grace.

Not in the tombs we pine to dwell,
Not in the dark monastic cell,
By vows and gates confined;
Freely to all ourselves we give,
Constrained by Jesus' love to live
The servants of mankind.

If Thomas à Kempis missed the fiery, passionate enthusiasm of St. Francis as an evangelist; if he shows little of Francis' gay joyousness, his wide, all-embracing love, if the silence and often gloomy atmosphere of the cloister too often invade his spirit, it is never difficult to subtract these things from his pages and receive what he has to give us.

CHRONOLOGICAL CHART TO ILLUSTRATE THOMAS À KEMPIS' TIMES.

	Ecclesiastical Biography.	*Ecclesiastical History.*	*Art and Letters.*	*Politics.*
	1260-1365. Eckhart, Tauler, Suso. 1293-1381. Ruysbroeck. 1340. Gerard Groot b. 1343-1413. Julian of Norwich.	1309-1377. "Babylonish Captivity": Pope at Avignon.		
1350			1370-1440. Van Eyck Bros. 1374. Petrarch d.	1337-1453. English war with France.
1375	1377. *T. a Kempis* b. 1380. Catherine of Siena d. 1383. Gerson b. 1384. Wyclif d. 1384. Gerard Groote d. 1396. W. Hylton d.	1378-1418. "The Great Schism." 1398. Mount St. Agnes founded.	1380. "Piers Plowman." 1387-1455. Fra Angelico. 1399. Chaucer d. (?).	1377. Henry IV. 1399. Henry V. King of England.
1400	1414. *T. à Kempis ordained priest.* 1417. Hus burnt.	1409. Council of Pisa. 1414. Council of Constance.	1412-1469. Fra Lippo Lippi.	1415. Agincourt. 1422. Henry VI.
1425	1429. Gerson d.		1440. Invention of Printing. 1449-1498. Ghirlandajo.	1431. Joan of Arc burnt.
1450	1452. Savonarola b. 1466. Erasmus b. 1471. *T. à Kempis* d.		1452-1519. Leonardo da Vinci. 1471-1528. A. Dürer.	1453. Fall of Constantinople. 1455-1471. Wars of Roses. 1461. Edward IV.
1475	1482. Luther b. 1484. Zwingli b. 1491. Ignatius Loyola b. 1498. Savonarola burnt.	1480. Inquisition in Spain.	1475-1563. M. Angelo. 1477-1576. Titian.	1476. Caxton settles in England. 1485. Henry VII. 1492. Columbus sailed for America.
1500				

CHAPTER III

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST": ARRANGEMENT AND CONTENTS

"The author of the *Imitation* was an artist of highest rank, and he built his work, sentence by sentence, with an indefinable skill, with a constructive genius that defies analysis. . . . With an unerring judgment he has gone to the literary sources and fountains where is to be found that yearning 'of the alone for the Alone,' which he adopts and teaches."—DE MONTMORENCY: *Thomas à Kempis*, p. 170.

To the literary student *The Imitation* has many points of interest in its arrangement and contents underlying its devotional value. There is no account of its composition, and we can only guess that as Thomas à Kempis wrote each separate section he allowed copies to be passed to suitable readers in different monasteries. We have no dates except within the period 1420-1425.

I.

The usual title for the book is taken from its opening words, for Thomas seems to have given no title himself to his four tracts. In English translations there are a variety of titles—*Like unto Christ, The Following of Christ, The Christian Pattern,* and so on. Dr. C. Bigg's translation

has the title *Ecclesiastical Music* as an alternative, from the fact already noted that some MSS. called the work in Latin *De Musica Ecclesiastica*. Whence this description? Dr. Bigg himself explains it as due to the subject: "The music is of the Inner Life, or, more specially, the *mellifluum nomen* of the Redeemer. . . . It is marked by two artistic features, Rhyme and Rhythm."* But is this sufficient? There is another possible explanation at hand, for the Latin version, as originally written, has certain musical signs in some of the MSS., which suggests that the sentences were intended to be intoned or chanted. The first hint of this explanation was given by Dr. Hirsche of Hamburg in 1874 in an edition he published in Berlin. It has further been explained by M. C. Ruelens of the Royal Library, Brussels, where some of the MSS. are: "The full stop followed by a small capital, the full stop followed by a large capital, the colon followed by a small letter, the usual sign of interrogation, and lastly, an unusual sign, the *clivis* or *flexa*, used in the musical notation of the period." This method, followed in a 1441 MS., obviously suggests chanting or intoning and the title *Musica Ecclesiastica*. There is no doubt that Thomas "carried music in his heart," and loved to sing of his Lord, for there are hymns written by him. May he not have intended that just as he chanted the Psalms and found an additional help to his devotion by the practice, he

* p. ix; cf. x-xv.

may have wished to have his book used in similar manner? William Law, in his *Serious Call*, actually advises that we should use music or chanting in private devotion. It is worth while quoting his words: "You are, therefore, to consider the chanting of a Psalm as a necessary beginning of your devotions, as something that is to awaken all that is good and holy within you, that is to call your spirits to your duty, to set you in your best posture towards heaven, and tune all your powers of soul to worship and adoration. . . . The difference between singing and reading a Psalm will be easily understood, if you consider the difference between reading and singing a common song. Whilst you only read it, you only like it, and that is all; but as soon as you sing it, then you enjoy it, you feel the delight of it: it has got hold of you, your passions keep pace with it, and you feel the same spirit within that seems to be in the words."

And for the non-musical, Law offers this comfort: "Singing is no more required for the music that is made by it, than prayer is made by the fine words that it contains. . . . Our blessed Saviour and His apostles sang a hymn; but it may reasonably be supposed that they rather rejoiced in God than made fine music" (*Serious Call*, ch. xv.). This piece of practical advice for devotion from such a master as William Law suggests quite another explanation from that of Dr. Bigg, and if anyone will try *The Imitation* by chanting he will not be sur-

prised to find that here is the secret of calling the book *De Musica Ecclesiastica*.*

Thomas à Kempis was a hymn-writer, but lacked the lyrical note without which no hymn becomes popular. S. J. Stone, a writer of some well-known hymns, has translated six or seven into English; here is part of one, as given in Kettlewell's biography:

Be the life of Christ thy Saviour evermore thine imitation.
So in pureness, truth, and honour shall be all thy conversation.
Sing His Birth with holy gladness,
Mourn His Death with holy sadness;
Mingle gladness with thy mourning in thy spirit's exercises,
Wipe away thy woes with weeping: 'ware the world's delights and prizes.

Jesus seek with search unfailing,
Knock and cry in prayer prevailing;
In adoring hymns delight thee,
Thoughts of Jesus shall requite thee;
Yet more sweet His joy's fruition,
Sweeter still His heavenly vision.
Bear with love unceasing,
All thy toils increasing;
Show the world unkind
Wisdom's quiet mind;
Still by prayer and reading
All thy senses heeding,
And as hours are flying
Still the world denying.

But however the name *De Musica Ecclesiastica* was attached to the book, it is not now likely,

* Canon Liddon edited a copy of *The Imitation* where the translation was rendered into short lines.

nor is any other, to supplant *The Imitation of Christ* as a title. We have already seen that the words do not altogether exactly express the main thought of à Kempis; but it is not the first nor will it be the last book where the title has been apt to mislead only the casual reader.

II.

The order in which the four sections have been printed varies: should the book on Holy Communion be placed third in order or last? Dr. C. Bigg has followed the MS. which seems to have been that of à Kempis himself and differs from most editions. His order is this:

Admonitions useful for a Spiritual Life.
Admonitions drawing to the Inner Life.
A devout exhortation to Holy Communion.
The book of Internal Consolations.

In support of this arrangement Mr. Montmorency has brought forward a very ingenious suggestion to the effect that Thomas à Kempis had the ground-plan of his book in his mind from a paragraph in one of Henry Suso's writings, and that he was far more of a literary artist than is generally thought, for his art was of that supreme simplicity that shows little signs of workmanship but has the consummate ease of a master. We shall see presently that allusions and quotations abound. The paragraph in Suso is as follows, in a passage in which that mystic is writing about the soul's return to

God: "First of all, we should disentangle ourselves absolutely from the pleasures of the world, manfully turning our backs upon all vices; we should turn to God by continual prayers, by seclusion and holy exercise, that the flesh may be thus subdued to the spirit. Next, we must offer ourselves willingly to endure all the troubles that may come upon us, from God or from the creatures. Thirdly, we must impress upon ourselves the Passion of Christ crucified; we must fix upon our minds His sweet teaching, His most gentle conversation, His most pure life, which He gave us for our example, and so we must penetrate deeper and advance farther in our Imitation of Him. Fourthly, we must divest ourselves of external occupations, and establish ourselves in a tranquil stillness of soul by an energetic resignation, as if we were dead to self and thought only of the honour of Christ and His Heavenly Father. Lastly, we must be humble towards all men, whether friends or foes." Now, when compared with the order as given by Dr. Bigg, the resemblance is near enough to suggest that Thomas à Kempis may have had this in his mind. Both he and Suso follow in the main the chart or map of the soul's pilgrimage as charted by many of the mystic schools. Behind this fourfold order lie the stages of Purgation, Illumination, Consummation. Mysticism as represented by *The Imitation* will be treated later on, but we can easily see how the first two books deal with the Purgative stage, the

discipline of the soul before it receives the light. The third section on Holy Communion represents Illumination, when the soul partakes, not only of the heavenly bread, but also receives the Light, for Christ is both Sustenance and Knowledge to the soul of His disciple. "The book of Internal Consolations," as Bigg names the last book, is obviously the Consummation, the soul's union with its Saviour and Lord, finding its rest in Him. The deeper mysteries which the mystical writers often speak of, "the dark night of the soul," "the abyss of Deity," "the absorption of the soul in God," are experiences scarcely touched upon by Thomas à Kempis. The extremes are omitted both of the depths below and the heights above. Some editors have placed the book on Holy Communion as the final climax, but if it be placed third in the order it becomes a means to the end, a veritable "means of grace," for the end lies not in a service but in an experience. The end of man's pilgrimage is to be one with Christ in God, a oneness that preserves the identity of man whilst bound to God with the chain of an immortal love.

These mystical stages on the soul's route are not those of the Evangelical Christian who marks the three stages on his map as Repentance, Regeneration, Sanctification. Though the phraseology differs and the differences are both subtle and many, we may consider them as different aspects of the same fundamental spiritual facts. The Evangelical lays more stress on certain

aspects of Christ's work than the Mystic would. What we need for the whole truth is a synthesis of all the scattered truths of man's experience of Christ. Whatever the variety in these truths, there is a common likeness, since every truth finds its perfect exhibition in Him who is the Truth. When we get below the names and the theologies to the experimental side of religion, the superficial differences disappear and a real unity is revealed. We grow nearer one another as we gravitate towards the centre of all life in Jesus Christ. It was part of the work of a man like Thomas à Kempis to get below the surface so that Christians of all schools read his masterpiece with infinite profit, for Christ's Spirit pervades its pages. It is our agreements, not our disagreements, that really count. In our agreements we exhibit the greatness of our Master: in our disagreements we often show our own limitations.

III.

Thomas à Kempis must have had either a retentive memory or a commonplace book, for scholars have shown that the book is a mosaic of allusions and quotations. He most certainly had no desire to parade his learning, since many of these are so hidden that only a well-read scholar can detect them. They are very carefully woven into the very texture of his thought. Anyone who turns to Dr. Bigg's edition or to Mr. Montmorency's book will see this proved

at once. This is not to say *The Imitation* is not an original book, nor is the charge of plagiarism to be sustained. Thomas knew that many pilgrims had travelled the road he was depicting, and he was willing to pass on hints from anyone who had good advice to give to the traveller, or warnings which it were folly to ignore.

The laborious task of copying out the Vulgate bears its fruit in these pages by the large number of Scriptural references and quotations. It has been calculated that there are about 1,026 Biblical references, taken from the whole range of the sacred book, including the Old Testament Apocrypha: most are from the Psalms, the next in number are from the Epistles, whilst the Gospels take the third place. This is a fact to be taken into account when we understand by the word "imitation" the idea of copying: had this been Thomas à Kempis' chief idea in the book, the Gospels would naturally have been used far more frequently. This use of the Bible is entirely in the method of *The New Devotion*, for Gerard Groot had insisted on this and prepared the way for the true place of the Scriptures in the culture of the soul, a place more fully recognized in the Reformation period. Thomas à Kempis knew of other wells also, and dipped his bucket accordingly. Of classic authors he quotes Aristotle once, if not twice (I. II.); Seneca (I. XX.); Ovid (I. XIII.); perhaps Vergil (IV. IX.); Horace (III. IV.); Pliny (III. XXV.); Lucan (III. XXIV.);

whilst the influence coming from Plato through Plotinus and the Neoplatonists can be traced in the influences which mysticism showered upon him. Dante's famous line,

> In His Will is our peace,

might be taken as the basis of the prayer in Book IV. xv. There are, of course, references to such great Christian teachers as Thomas Aquinas and Anselm; but the great masters of his thought were Augustine and Bernard. There is a quotation from St. Francis of Assisi as given by Bonaventura:

> What a man is in Thy sight that he is and no more (IV. I.).

Such is something of the range we can discover within these quiet pages, for he eagerly laid under contribution any help that might be of service in setting out the truth as he understood it. He resolutely wished to be as simple as he could and turned aside from Scholasticism with its endless speculations:

> What profit is there in lengthy quibbling about dark and hidden things? . . . What have we to do with *genera* and *species*? (I. III. i.).* Cease from an inordinate desire of knowledge: for therein is found great distraction and deceit (I. II.). An humble knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God:

* Dr. Bigg's translation and order of the books are used throughout.

> than a deep search after learning. . . . He is truly learned: that does the will of God and forsakes his own will (I. III. iii.). Throw aside subtleties: read such books: as rather stir compunction, than furnish occupation (I. XX.).

Thomas à Kempis is not a theological teacher; he accepted so far as we know the dogmas of the Church as he had learnt them. His concern was with heart-knowledge, the experimental knowledge of God that alone gives peace. Here is the value of his book: it is a book for the heart. Here is the centre on which all swings. It is this which gives *The Imitation* its universal appeal and permanence. Knowledge increases, modes of thought change; but the heart of man abides conscious of moral weakness with perennial need of the grace of God to cleanse and change. He deals with those strata of thought and emotion that lie below the surface. He is the geologist and not the geographer of the soul.

> Blessed is the simplicity, which leaves the difficult paths of dispute: and goes forward in the plain and solid path of God's commandments. Many have lost devotion: whilst they sought to search into things too high (III. XVIII.).

CHAPTER IV

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST": ITS MESSAGE

"It is stiff soil and none but fully consecrated men will accomplish much. Comfort seeking, etc., won't do there. *Cross-loving* men are needed."—*Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission.*

THERE must be a deep grain of humanity in *The Imitation,* for its appeal is by no means confined to orthodox Christian circles. It has been appreciated by orthodox and heterodox, Roman, Anglican, Protestant, "those without." Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism, read it daily for years, and valued it for moral culture. But few eulogies have surpassed George Eliot's famous description in *The Mill on the Floss,* usually reckoned as autobiographical, as is confirmed by one of her letters: "I have at last the most wonderful *De Imitatione Christi* with quaint woodcuts. One breathes the cool air as of the cloisters in the book—it makes one long to be a saint for a few months. Verily its piety has its foundations in the depth of the human heart." This was written in 1849, three years after she had published her translation of Strauss and ten years earlier than the novel. It is worth while quoting again that great appreciation, for it speaks for many others beside Maggie

Tulliver: "Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets —here was a sublime height to be reached without the aid of outward things—here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her soul, where a supreme Teacher was to be heard. . . . She had not perceived—how could she till she lived longer?—the utmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly. . . . I suppose that is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a bookstall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness. . . . And it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations: the voice of a brother, who, ages ago, felt, suffered, and renounced . . . under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness."*

I.

The King's Way of the Holy Cross.

Beautiful and true as this appreciation is, it is, of course, not by any means all that *The Imitation* can give its readers. For instance, Thomas à Kempis did not believe that the heavens were always silent or that the commu-

* *George Eliot's Life*, p. 108; *Mill on the Floss*, IV. iii.

nion was merely a human monologue. But renunciation is an essential part of his message. Renunciation is not only to be borne willingly, as if with dumb resignation, but cheerfully, with hearty co-operation; the cross is to be carried for the joy set before us; the note is *Per crucem ad lucem;* the way is *The King's Way of the Holy Cross* :

> If thou carry thy cross cheerfully it will carry thee, and lead thee to the desired end—namely, where there shall be an end of suffering: though here there shall be none (II. XII. ii.). O Lord Jesus, as Thou hast said and promised: so truly let it be, and may I not be undeserving. I have received the cross, I have received it from Thy hand: I will carry it and carry it unto death: as Thou hast laid it upon me (IV. LVI. iii.). Come, brothers, march together: Jesus will be with us. For Jesus we took up this cross: for Jesus let us persevere in the cross. He will be our Helper: who is our Guide and Forerunner. Behold, our King goes before us: and He will fight for us. Let us follow manfully, let no man fear terrors: let us be ready to die valiantly in battle: nor bring such disgrace on our glory as to flee from the cross (IV. LVI. iv.).

It will be seen that the tone of these words differs from that with which Maggie Tulliver met her great trials. She had not learnt what the Psalmist knew: *Blessed be the Lord who*

daily beareth our burdens ; nor had her creator. But à Kempis knew, and put it into a little epigram quoted by Dr. Bigg as a note to this very passage: *Portat portantem* (It bears the bearer). It is what Samuel Rutherford knew when he wrote: "It is such a burden as wings are to a bird, or sails are to a ship, to carry me forward to my harbour."* The cross a man has to carry may be a lifebelt: the firmer it is grasped the more it holds its holder in the roughest sea. *Teneo et teneor.*

Renunciation, however, is an ugly word to many till a little reflection shows how deeply implanted it is in the very stuff of life. "Not renunciation," men cry, "but expansion, inclusion; not renunciation, but fulness, richness, breadth!" So we cry, and forget how nature teaches us again and again that if we would have one thing there are other things incompatible with its possession; to hold the one we have to let the other go. *Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.* Choice of one calling implies renunciation of another; the worker has to renounce idleness; to marry is to renounce the freedom of the single life; the athlete abandons everything that will soften or relax his muscles; at death we have to renounce our earthly life and career. Is it as hard as men are apt to suppose? Is the demand of life for singleness of purpose so very grievous when we consider the limits of our powers of accomplishment? The apostolic challenge, *What concord hath*

* *Letters,* Bonar's ed., p. 262.

Christ with Belial? with its declaration that things differ, that to get one the other must be renounced, is in perfect accord with life's demand for every man. The lower must be left behind for the higher, evil renounced in favour of the good, the temporal yield place to the eternal. Says our author,

> Vanity is it to set thy heart on that which speedily passes away: and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy abides (I. i.). Rather choose to have all the world against thee: than Jesus angry. Above all, therefore, that be dear: let Jesus alone be specially beloved. Love all for Jesus: but Jesus for Himself. Jesus Christ alone is singularly to be beloved: who alone is found good and faithful above all friends (II., VIII. ii. iii.).

To abide in Jesus's love means a certain contempt of the world, renunciation of its spirit, its temper, its display, its prizes. Simplicity and purity of heart are " the two wings which lift man up from the earth " (II. IV.). Renounce self, deny self, the selfish pride, the self that loves and seeks dainty, luxurious things, the self that erects upon the throne of its worship anything but Jesus. This is the call of Thomas à Kempis. Later on it will be seen that this call is perhaps overstrained, since his view of civilization is that of the monk; but meantime let us recall that it is true to one element in the teaching of Jesus, for His disciples were not

freed from the world, but to be in it as strangers and soldiers fighting its evil. The modern conception of consecrating the world is beset with perils, for entanglement has proved fatal to many, snares are on every side, the atmosphere is soft and lulls the soul to sleep. For what is "the world," what is "worldliness," but, as Bishop Creighton once happily phrased it, "life with God left out"—life, that is, which is practical atheism, life where the soul is disregarded and sinks to stark materialism? Luther once summed up: "No one is less in the world than a Christian and no one is more worldly than a Christian."* The paradox is true and reveals how difficult it is to state truth exactly. Father Tyrrell in his Preface to *The Imitation* says justly that "this doctrine of 'Flight' must give place to the doctrine of 'Right Use'"; but Thomas à Kempis with monastic bias lays emphasis on flight from the world.

Jesus used the illustration of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying before the rich fruit can be born (John xii. 26), whilst St. Paul uses the illustration of crucifixion (Gal. vi. 14) to bring out this principle of Renunciation. That is, of course, to say that we "die to live." In our experience we find analogies to the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of our Lord, so that we may be born into a new life wherein the old self is denied and lost in forgetfulness. "To be born again

* See Herrman, *Communion with God*, p. 201.

is to renounce the old life, sin, and the natural man, to take to oneself another principle of life. It is to exist for God with another self, another will, another love. . . . To live in God and do His work—this is religion, salvation, eternal life; this is both the effect and the sign of love and of the Holy Spirit." So writes Amiel in his *Journal*,* and in his clear way he points to the truth that lies in this great word "renunciation." It is well expressed by Francis Thompson by way of the law of dying to live in the circle of nature's processes:

> For birth hath in itself the germ of death,
> And death hath in itself the germ of birth.
> It is the falling acorn buds the tree,
> The falling rain that bears the greenery,
> The fern-plants moulder when the ferns arise.
> For there is nothing lives but something dies,
> And there is nothing dies but something lives.

The renunciation that Jesus taught is to renounce the temporal for the eternal, the shadow for the substance, the illusion for the real. It is to forget our narrow, isolated self in the remembrance of a higher, nobler self which we gain by fellowship with other people or with Christ. When the young V.C. officer was asked how he came to be brave enough to do his heroic deed, he replied: "Oh, I suppose I forgot myself." In his hour of danger he had found the secret of all true life. Our instinct in the hour of peril is to preserve ourselves, and this instinct is ceaselessly at war with the

* p. 71.

nobler instinct to guard and rescue our neighbours. The risk we take in helping them is the measure of our self-renunciation and self-forgetfulness.

Renunciation as a doctrine for life suffers most of all from its suspicion of negation: it suggests restraint, the "thou shalt not" type of life. But its correlative, concentration, has a more positive tone and is, perhaps, the better word to use. The man who concentrates on business or politics, books or athletics, necessarily renounces those things inimical to these pursuits. He denies himself all that would hinder his practice in these different expressions of life. Thomas à Kempis bids men concentrate on Jesus Christ and abandon all things for love of Him. If he calls this world of civilized life a vanity, it is a vanity in comparison with the supreme reality of Jesus. Here, of course, he simply reiterates Jesus' call: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness* (Matt. vi. 33); or the apostolic *Therefore come away from them, separate, saith the Lord* (2 Cor. vii. 17). The world is full of a number of things that are able to hinder or to promote the Kingdom, but the call of Jesus is that everything must be subservient and only used as it stands in relation to God's rightful place in the world. A little lad in reading a well-known verse stumbled over the word "consecrated," and read the lines—

Take my life and let it be
Concentrated, Lord, on Thee.

Could there be a better interpretation ? It was the fashion of à Kempis' day to conceive of the holy life, the religious life, as possible only in the cloister, in a flight from the world by retirement; but if our modern world takes a less fugitive view of religion and its duties, it behoves us beware lest we secularize the holy in our effort to hallow the secular. We still need to have emphatic warnings that our hearts are to renounce all lower aims than those which Jesus has set before us and to carry His cross in our hearts if we are to be loyal to Him, dying to all that is not His, and living a life of which He alone is both centre and circumference.

II.

Imitation.

It has already been pointed out that of the external copying of Jesus there is hardly anything in *The Imitation,* that à Kempis follows closely the apostolic teaching as to the way Jesus' disciples should follow their Example. He follows them, for instance, in that what he does say about imitating is chiefly confined to the example of Christ's patient endurance, His fidelity to His task, His bearing of the cross. It is as if Jesus were chiefly to be thought of in the days of His Passion. The silent years at Nazareth, the carpenter's bench, the loyalty to Jewish customs of religion, the social life, are scarcely ever named. It is true that Thomas à Kempis did think on these things, for he wrote

a book, *Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*, from which this prayer is taken:

> O most adorable Jesus, brightest mirror of a holy life, grant, I beseech Thee, to me, Thy unworthy servant, whose life has hitherto been grievously at variance with Thy holy will, so to meditate on Thy most sweet and perfect example, that I may be led to fashion all my actions and behaviour in accordance with it: that I may learn from it to be meek and lowly in heart, to be moderate in taking my food: simple in my dress: modest in my bearing: not hurried in my gait: calm in my mind: not an idle talker: prudent in my actions: guarded both in my outward and inward life: watchful in prayer: devout in meditation: patient under correction: prompt in obedience: easy to be led in every good way: not slow, not careless, not sullen, not restless, not inconstant, not noisy: but kind, cheerful, affable, and unassuming (Pt. I. XXI.).

But we have very little of this kind of reference to Jesus' character in *The Imitation* itself. And though its opening words suggest that following the Master implies an imitation of His "life and manners," the idea is not anywhere developed. Where it is touched upon we have passages like these occurring in dialogues between Christ and His disciple:

> O Lord Jesus, forasmuch as Thy life was poor and despised by the world:

> grant me grace to imitate Thee though with the world's contempt. . . . Let Thy servant be trained in Thy life: for therein is my salvation, and true holiness (IV. LVI. ii.). I became of all men the humblest and lowest: that thou mightest beat down thy pride with My humility (IV. XIII.). I came down from heaven for thy salvation: I took upon Me thy miseries, not necessity but charity drawing Me thereto: that thou mightest learn patience and bear temporal miseries without complaint. For from the hour of My birth, to My death on the cross: I was not without suffering of grief (IV. XVIII.). For Thy life is our way: and by Thy holy patience we walk toward Thee who art our Crown. If Thou hadst not gone before us and taught us: who would care to follow? Alas! how many would remain afar off and behind: if they saw not Thy noble Example (IV. XVIII.).

But there is nothing from beginning to end of the book to lead us to seek an "encyclopædic knowledge" of Jesus. There is no redrawing of the Figure of the Gospel story: the tone of speaking of Jesus is that of the Epistles, not the Gospels. It is the heart, the mind, the temper, the character of our Lord which are ever before us as the pattern for life. Thomas à Kempis knows no difference between Jesus and the Christ: to him Jesus was the same Jesus, ever the same whether on the stage of history or living exalted in the heavens. He strains his

ear and bids us listen for the voice of Christ within his heart; and the words he puts into Christ's lips are seldom quotations from the Gospels—they represent the instruction that his Spirit-taught heart received as the truth.

> Happy the man whom truth teaches by itself, not in fleeting figures and words: but as it is in itself. . . . He to whom the Eternal Word speaks: is freed from many opinions. From one Word are all things; and all speak that one; and this is the Beginning, which also speaks to us. No man without that Word understands or judges aright. He to whom all things are one, he draws all things to one, and sees all things in one: may be stablished in heart: and rest as a peacemaker in God. . . . Let all doctors hold their peace, let all creatures keep silence in Thy sight: speak Thou alone to me (I. III. i.). Blessed is the soul which hears the Lord speaking within her: and receives from His mouth the word of consolation. . . . Blessed indeed are those ears that listen not to the voice which babbles without: but to the Truth which teaches within (IV. I.).

Thus à Kempis rises beyond any mere copying of a pattern to become a listener to the Eternal Spirit, who to him was none other than the voice of Christ as He dwelt within his heart. The way to become like Jesus was for him the way of fellowship and communion.

III.

Mysticism.

The last set of quotations from *The Imitation* is noteworthy, and Mr. Montmorency fixes upon them as the basis of his claim that à Kempis was "a profound and blameless mystic," possessing "all the elements of Mysticism in his nature." But such a claim is not allowed by another lover of the book, Dr. Bigg, for he writes in his Introduction, "the religion of the heart is impatient of logical categories," and he will only allow that à Kempis was a half or semi-mystic. This of course hangs very much on what the true definition of Mysticism is, and, more definitely, what is Christian Mysticism. We get some conception of the range that the word covers by glancing at the articles on Mysticism in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, where the varieties are distributed into Primitive, Buddhist, Chinese, Hebrew, Hindu, Muslim, Persian (Greek and Roman are dealt with under the heading of "Mysteries"), whilst Christian Mysticism is subdivided into New Testament, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Russian. Dr. Rufus Jones in the first article thinks that the word covers (1) the first-hand experience of direct intercourse with God and (2) the theologico-metaphysical doctrine of the soul's possible union with Absolute Reality—*i.e.*, God. He thinks it would avoid a good deal of loose thinking and writing if the word were

restricted to the second idea, which represents the German word *mystik*. Dr. Bigg conceives of the mystic as one who shuts his eyes to facts and relies upon the Inner Light or one who seeks to lose his existence in the Eternal, or, in Christian terms, thinks solely or mainly of the Incarnation rather than of the Cross. Dean Inge says roundly, Thomas à Kempis "does not exhibit the distinguishing characteristics of Mysticism";* but then in his brilliant book on *Christian Mysticism* he has dealt with the inner circle of the chief masters, with whom few would rank à Kempis, whose place is in one of the outer courts.

The Imitation follows the Mysticism we find in the pages of the New Testament, in Paul and John. Thomas à Kempis was very sure of God, of the love that Jesus had shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit, of the indwelling of Jesus in his heart, and therefore Jesus' Presence was constantly with him in the monastery, and he had conscious union with Him whom he worshipped and loved so passionately. His religion was emphatically a religion of the heart. There is an illustration of his power to convey this to his readers in the case of John Wesley when he was twenty-two years of age: "The Providence of God directing me to à Kempis' *Christian Pattern*, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions. I was, however, very

* p. 194.

angry at Kempis for being too strict: though I read him only in Dean Stanhope's translation. Yet I have frequently much sensible comfort in reading him, such as I was an utter stranger to before."* The popularity of our little book is doubtless due to this and the further fact that it seldom goes beyond the range of such experiences as can be easily paralleled in the New Testament.

It is far more important to " attend to what is said " than to be anxious about the exact class of mystic to which Thomas belonged, but when we read the following we have some of his guiding thoughts:

> The habit and the shaven crown do little profit: but changes of manners and perfect mortification of passions make a true religious man (I. XVII.). Some carry their devotion only in books: some in images: some in outward signs and figures. Some have Me in their mouths, but little in their hearts (IV. IV. ii.). Many run to distant places to visit the relics of the saints: and but little amendment is reaped thereby (III. I. iv.). If thou intend and seek nothing else but the pleasure of God and the good of thy neighbour: thou shalt enjoy perfect internal freedom. If thy heart were right: then every creature would be a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine. There is no creature so small and

* *Journal*, i. 99; cf. also the story of John Newton's conversion on a slave-trader by the agency of the same translation in the year 1748.

abject: but it reflects the goodness of God (II. IV.). Let nothing be great unto thee, nothing high, nothing pleasing, nothing acceptable: but simply God or that which is of God (II. V.). Man's welfare, then, lies not in things outward that he gains or amasses: but in despising them . . . this thou must understand not only of income and wealth: but of seeking after honour and the desire of vain praise (IV. XXVII.). To walk inwardly with God, and not be fettered by any affection without: is the state of an inward man (II. VI.). The more thou canst go out of thyself: the more wilt thou be able to pass into Me (IV. LVI. i.).

Every chapter in the book, we feel, is written by a man profoundly moved by spiritual realities, seeking unrealized worlds, unsatisfied till he can reach all that God can give him, and he quotes as well as bases his book on Augustine's famous sentence, "Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." The book is one of the many great literary witnesses the world possesses for the reality of the spiritual kingdom, and man's ability to live within its frontiers, enjoying its manifold blessings. Thomas à Kempis is one of the sanest mystics, and brings the things of heaven down to cottage doors. There are a few visions recorded of him, but the passage in Book I. XXV. i. may confidently be read as autobiography:

One that was in sore anxiety and often wavered between hope and fear, and once

was mastered by sorrow, prostrated himself in a church before an altar in prayer: and said within himself, "Oh, if I knew that I should yet persevere!" Presently he heard the Divine answer within him, "But if thou didst know it, what wouldst thou do? Do now what thou wouldst then: and thou shalt be free from fear." And being therewith comforted and strengthened he committed himself to the will of God: and that anxious fluctuation ceased.*

There is, of course, nothing very unusual in this, except that we are slower than the saints to recognize the Divine Spirit moving within our own minds, in the answers we ourselves give to our own questions or in the splendour of our sudden inspirations. Men seek for audible voices where they can have the silent voice within if they will attune their hearts to the heavenly music.

Thomas followed the old style, Biblical and patristic, when he wrote out the elaborate dialogues in Books III. and IV. between the Beloved and the disciple. The dramatic element gives force and vividness to the dialogues within our hearts when we "argue with ourselves," or when we are conscious of two motives within striving to move our wills in diverse

* With this experience we may compare that of one who in an hour of doubt heard a voice, borne on the breeze, saying, "Act as though I were and thou shalt find I am."

directions. The mystics identified the higher voice, the voice of conscience, for instance, with the Divine voice, and looked upon it as conveying new wisdom, new truth, new light.* Thomas adopted this form, and has used it with remarkable effect. And one need not doubt that many of the truths he sets forth came to him as intuitions which he accepted as illuminating revelations from the Father of Lights.

IV.

Solitude and Fellowship.

The touch of the Spirit of Jesus upon men is felt in solitude and in fellowship, and à Kempis, with the monk's ideal before him, has given more prominence to solitude than the modern trend of thought in religion would give. It has been quoted how he would quit his companions and say that he had Someone waiting for him in his cell as an excuse for silence. He proved the efficacy of *When you pray, go into your room and shut the door* (Matt. vi. 6).

> If thou wilt withdraw from needless talk and idle gadding about, as also from listening to news and rumours: thou shalt find leisure enough and suitable for meditation on good things (I. xx.).

The whole of this chapter, Book I. xx., is *Of the Love of Solitude and Silence,* a theme to

* E. Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 333.

which he returns throughout. *The Imitation* might almost have been named, like William Penn's book, *Some Fruits of Solitude:* and it would not be misnamed.

> Leave vain things to the vain: fix thou thy thoughts upon God's commands to thee. Shut thy door behind thee: and call unto thee Jesus thy beloved (I. xx.).

But à Kempis was not without a sense of the value of friendship and fellowship. Life was intended for both. There are times for solitude and times for fellowship; there are truths more easily grasped and assimilated in fellowship, others more readily in solitariness. There are places in the heart where no friend can intrude, times when familiar friendship hinders the soul's development.

> Our progress is not a little helped by devout communing of spiritual things: especially when men of like mind and spirit be met together in God (I. x.). Without a friend thou canst not live well: and if Jesus be not above all a friend to thee: thou will be very sad and desolate (II. VIII. ii.). Thy love for thy friend should be grounded in Me, and for My sake shouldest thou love those who seem good to thee: and very dear in this life. Without Me friendship has no strength nor continuance; neither is that love true and pure: which is not knit by Me (IV. XLII.).

Thus we are taught to cultivate the living communion of saints. Methodist class-meetings, group-fellowships, and study circles would have had à Kempis' blessing upon them. It is to be feared, however, he would have wished the sexes separate, for there is no trace in his life that he ever knew the supreme value of the friendship of a good woman, as Augustine had known his mother or as St. Francis had known St. Clare. He lived in a world where only fellowship with men was known. He was a monk, and limited in his knowledge of life. Yet a woman of last century has written one of the noblest appreciations of the book, and the book is probably more often read by women than men.

V.

Ethics.

Scattered throughout the four pamphlets are ethical principles on which very little need be said, though it is interesting to note one or two points. Dr. Edward Caird has remarked on the fact that "in the *De Imitatione Christi* we find the utmost renunciation of self, the deepest prostration of humility, the most complete abandonment of every earthly aim and ambition, without any of the crudity and bitterness of Stoicism."* The ethics are indeed tinged with Stoic colouring, but one has only to compare

* *Evolution of Religion*, ii. 290.

the best thing that Stoicism has given to the world, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, with *The Imitation*, to discover the difference that Jesus has made to life. The Stoic sought to annihilate what Jesus would purify and use. Another point on the ethical side of the book is that Thomas à Kempis, being a monk, had taken the vow of obedience, whilst the modern Protestant exults in a freedom from authority and a willingness to take the responsibility of life upon his own shoulders knowing that he must answer for himself at the judgment-seat of Christ. Obedience to authority has its place in life, but the right of conscience has also its place. How often the rebel against authority has been the pioneer for the advance of mankind the pages of history show. We are under the rule of One " whose service is perfect freedom." To-day there are many who, shirking responsibility, seek to place themselves under the guidance of master or priest rather than feel the burden of self-direction, and in this are at one with Thomas.

For the right ordering of life the main virtues are simple—humility, patience, self-control, industry, abstinence from censoriousness, love towards all, service to the community. To the practice of some of the virtues we are summoned, since they were exhibited by the Example of Jesus; thus we have chapters in Book IV., *Of Obedience, Of Temporal Miseries to be borne calmly, That we ought to deny Ourselves and Imitate Christ by the Cross*, and in

detail the subject is often urged. But on the other hand, we have sentences like these:

> Gird up thy loins like a man against the wickedness of the devil: bridle thy appetite and thou wilt more easily bridle every inclination of the flesh. Never be wholly idle: but either reading or writing or praying or meditating or endeavouring something for the common good (I. XIX.). Better is a little wisdom with humility and a slender wit: than great treasures of learning with vain self-satisfaction. . . . If thou couldest always remain humbly and modestly within thyself: and further couldest wisely curb and rule thy spirit: thou wouldest not fall so quickly into danger and offence (IV. VII.). Turn thine eyes upon thyself: and beware thou judge not the actions of others. In judging of others a man labours in vain: often errs and easily sins: but in judging and examining himself he always labours fruitfully. We often judge of things as we like them: for we easily lose touch of judgment through private inclination (I. XIV.). First, therefore, be severe towards thyself: and then mayest thou justly be severe towards thy neighbour. Thou knowest well how to excuse and colour thine own deeds: but thou wilt not admit the excuses of others. It were more just that thou shouldest accuse thyself: and excuse thy brother. If thou wilt be carried:

carry also another (II. III.). If thou perfectly master thyself: thou shalt very easily bring all else under the yoke. The perfect victory is: to triumph over ourselves. For he that keeps himself in such subjection, that his sense be obedient to his reason, and his reason in all things to Me: is truly conqueror of himself and lord of the world (IV. LIII. i.). A man must strive hard and long within himself, before he can learn fully to master himself: and to draw his whole heart unto God (II. IX. i.).

This handful of quotations shows the kind of ethical standard that Thomas à Kempis teaches. But besides this, we have constantly a sane and practical form of worldly wisdom, due to a knowledge of men born of experience, a tactful management of life:

We often do badly: and excuse it worse (II. v.). Quit thyself like a man: one custom drives out another (I. XXI.). Old inbred habit will rebel: but by a better habit shall it be entirely overcome (IV. XII.). All is not spoiled: although thou feel thyself often afflicted and grievously tempted. Thou art man and not God. Thou art flesh and not angel (IV. LVII.). It is expedient to use the curb even in good endeavours and desires: lest through preoccupation thou incur distraction of mind: lest by want of self-government thou beget scandal unto others: or again by the con-

tradiction of others thou suddenly lose temper and fall (IV. xi.). Do often what thou wouldest not: and leave undone what thou wouldest (IV. xlix. ii,). Resist thy inclination in the beginning: and unlearn evil custom: lest perhaps little by little it draw thee into greater difficulty (I. xi.). Let not thy peace lie in the tongues of men. For whether they construe well or ill: thou art not therefore another man (IV. xxviii.). God weighs rather the means of the worker than the work he does. He does much: that loves much. He does much: that does a thing well. He does well: that serves the community rather than his own will (I. xv.).

VI.

Temptation.

The teaching on the subject of Temptation is full of shrewdness and wisdom. It lies mainly in two chapters, *On resisting Temptation* (I. xiii.) and *That there is no Safety from Temptation in this Life* (IV. xxxv.). À Kempis never strained after novelty; he was never afraid of truisms; he knew that temptations beset the soldier of Christ, who must ever be awake, alert, bating no jot of hope or courage. None are safe. We are cradled in temptation, and we swing to and fro and are never beyond its reach.

There is no order so holy, no place so secret: where there be no temptations or

> adversities. . . . Many shun temptations: and fall more grievously into them. By flight alone we cannot overcome. . . . By little and little, and by patience with long-suffering through God's help thou shalt better overcome. Often take counsel in temptation: and deal not roughly with him that is tempted: but give him comfort, as thou wouldest wish to be done to thyself.

After quoting Ovid's wise words, "Withstand beginnings: a remedy may come too late" (with which we may compare Amiel's "We shut our eyes to the beginnings of evil because they are small, and in this weakness is contained the germ of our defeat. *Principiis obsta*—this maxim dutifully followed would preserve us from almost all our catastrophes"),* Thomas goes on with an analysis of the development of temptation:

> For first there comes to the mind a bare thought: then a strong imagination: afterwards a delight and an evil motion and consent. And so by little and little our wicked enemy gets wholly in: because he is not resisted in the beginning. . . . Some are kept from great temptations, and in small daily ones are often overcome (I. XIII.).

The *raison d'être* of temptation is that we may be tested, proved, and "so stand pedestalled in triumph."

* *Journal*, p. 64.

> Fire tries iron: and temptation a just man. We often know not what we can do: but temptation shews us what we are (I. XIII.). Therefore we ought not to despair when we are tempted: but the more fervently to beseech God (I. XIII.). Dispose not thyself for much rest: but for great patience. Seek true peace not on earth but in heaven: not in men nor in any other creature: but in God alone. . . . Wait for the Lord. Quit thyself like a man, and be strong: distrust not, desert not: but boldly risk both body and soul for the glory of God. I will reward thee bountifully: I will be with thee in every tribulation (IV. XXXV. iii.). Lord, make that possible to me by Thy grace: which by nature seems impossible. Thou knowest, that I can suffer but little: and that I am quickly cast down when a light opposition encounters me (IV. XIX.).

It is curious to observe that *The Imitation* does not summon its readers to imitate the faith of Him who was *tempted in every respect like ourselves yet without sinning,* and in His victorious faith is an example to all His tempted followers. *So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in the hour of need* (Heb. iv. 15, 16).

VII.

Grace.

In May, 1750, John Wesley records in his *Journal*, " I have preached much longer than I am accustomed, finding it an acceptable time. Well might Kempis say, ' He rides easily whom the Grace of God carries.' " The quotation is from Book II. IX., a chapter that exhibits the sanity of à Kempis in that he recognizes the tides, the ebb and flow, the moods of the soul. He knew the music of the inner life often falls below concert pitch; he does not, however, deal definitely with that discord of the monastic life, called *accidie*, of which the late Bishop Paget gave an analysis in his *The Spirit of Discipline*, for he was not one who felt that he had mistaken his vocation. He quotes Ps. xxx. 6-11 to show what " great saints and ancient prophets" had experienced:

> If great saints were so dealt with: we that are weak and poor should not despair, if we be sometimes fervent and sometimes cold. . . . In what, then, can I hope or in whom should I trust: save in the great mercy of God alone, and in the only hope of heavenly grace? For whether I have with me good men or devout brethren or faithful friends: whether holy books or beautiful treatises, or sweet chants and hymns: all these help but little, have but

little savour: when grace forsakes me and I am left alone in mine own poverty (II. IX. ii., iii.).

The soul's remedy and medicine, therefore, is Grace, which Thomas never defines, but describes abundantly in the great chapter where he compares and contrasts Nature and Grace (IV. LIV.). What, then, is Grace? In what sense is that rich word used? It is the antithesis of Nature, and stands for that side of every action which from another side we call faith. Grace is the Divine and faith the human side of our experience of salvation. "They are the two indissoluble sides of one act, through which the union between God and man becomes actual."*

> O Grace truly celestial: without which is no merit of our own: nor are any gifts of nature to be esteemed. Arts, riches, beauty, or strength: wit or eloquence are powerless before Thee without Thy grace, O Lord. . . . Although I be tempted and vexed with many tribulations, yet I will fear no evils: so long as Thy grace is with me. This is my strength; this gives counsel and help. . . . It is the schoolmistress of truth, the teacher of discipline: the light of the heart, the solace of affliction, the dispeller of gloom: the cure of fear, the nurse of devotion, the fountain of tears. . . . Let Thy grace, therefore, Lord,

* Inge, *Faith and its Psychology*, p. 239.

always prevent and follow me; and make me to be continually given to good works (IV. LV. ii., iii.). Grant me the grace to imitate Thee though with the world's contempt (IV. LVI. ii.).

Grace in Thomas à Kempis' vocabulary practically stands for the supernatural life, the Divine love and power which works in man. In Protestant circles this is usually regarded as the operation of the Holy Spirit, since He is regarded as the Author of all our good. The word as à Kempis used it has been lifted out of its New Testament or Pauline use, for the free, unmerited love of God exhibited in His treatment of sinners in a full and free forgiveness, a conception that Luther restored to the Church; it has been changed into a synonym for the work which Luther would say was the work of the Holy Spirit within the heart. "Grace has always a convex side towards God and a concave side towards man. Taken separately, they are contradictory and opposite, but, united, they are as perfectly one as the convex and concave sides in one line."* It stands, therefore, for the superhuman life to which every Christian is called, a life of "union and co-operation with Jesus Christ, and who, therefore, as a matter of course, is equal to any demands upon him. . . . The need to-day," Dr. E. A. Burroughs pro-

* Oman, *Grace and Personality*, p. 182; cf. article on Grace (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) in *E.R.E.* vi. 364 *f.*

ceeds, "is that every Christian should be a Christian in the full sense."*

This enforcement of the disciple by Grace makes even imitation a new thing, for henceforth he says, *I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me*: he is not alone by his unaided efforts to struggle after an impossible ideal, to be a mere copyist: he opens his nature to the Grace of God that he may follow Christ. Grace is the dynamic of ethical perfection.

VIII.

The Love of Jesus.

But the motive that urges such a following is love, the love that has been awakened by a sense of the Love of Jesus. Jesus is the Beloved, the "most tremendous Lover" who claims all in return for the all He gave. In Book IV. v. and VI. this devotion of heart to Jesus is expounded at length. Whilst Grace is the mode in which Jesus sheds His love into the heart. Love impels Grace to move, for Love was the open secret of the Cross where everybody can read, *He loved me and gave Himself up for me.* To Thomas the name Jesus is synonymous with Lover. How it moulds life he has set out in a noble passage, fit to stand side by side with Paul's great psalm in 1 Cor. xiii.

The noble love of Jesus impels to great deeds: and arouses a constant desire for

* *Valley of Decision*, p. 263.

greater perfection. Love longs to soar: and will not be held down by things that are low. Love longs to be free, and estranged from all worldly affection: that its inner eye may not be dimmed: that it may not be caught by any temporal prosperity: nor by any adversity cast down. Nothing is sweeter than Love: nothing braver, nothing higher, nothing wider: nothing sweeter, nothing fuller nor better in heaven or on earth: because Love is born of God: and can only rest in God above all created things.

The lover flies, runs, and rejoices: he is free and cannot be held. He gives all for all: and has all in all. . . . He regards not gifts: but turns himself above all gifts to the Giver. . . . Love feels no burden: counts no pains, exerts itself beyond its strength: talks not of impossibility: for it thinks all things possible and all permitted (IV. v. ii,).

But Thomas à Kempis is not praising love *in vacuo*, it is personal and centred on Jesus: elsewhere he gives us certain ways of proving the true Lover:

Son, thou art not yet a brave and discreet lover.

Why, Lord?

A brave lover stands firm in temptation: nor listens to the crafty persuasions of the enemy. As I please him in fair weather:

so I displease not in foul. . . . He counts the affection rather than the price: and sets the Beloved above all his gifts. . . . All is not lost, because at times thy heart is not stirred. . . . Neither is it an illusion that at times thou art suddenly rapt in ecstasy: and presently returnest unto the accustomed follies of thy heart. . . . Fight like a good soldier: and if at times thou fall through weakness, take again greater strength than before, trusting in larger grace from Me: and take heed of foolish conceit and of pride. Through this many are led into error: and fall at times into blindness past cure. Let the fall of the proud thus foolishly presuming on themselves: teach thee caution and constant humility (IV. VI.). A lover of Jesus and truth, who truly lives the inner life and is free from inordinate affections: can freely turn himself to God, and lift himself above himself in spirit and rest in fruition (II. I. ii.). Come, faithful soul, make ready thy heart for this Bridegroom: that He may come unto thee and dwell within thee (II. I. i.). They who love Jesus for the sake of Jesus and not for some special comfort of their own: bless Him in all tribulation and distress of heart as well as in dearest comfort (II. XI.). Thy Beloved is of such a nature, that He will bear no rival: but will have thy heart to Himself: and sit on His throne as King. . . . For man doth more hurt to himself if he

seek not Jesus: than the whole world and all his enemies (II. VII.).

These quotations are but samples of what every reader knows permeates and thrills throughout *The Imitation,* for if one thing is certain about the book more than another it is the passionate devotion of the heart to Jesus. For the sake of it à Kempis left all, and turned his face against every let and hindrance, and set his heart's altar alight by communion with his Beloved Lord, feeding the fire with everything that would cause it to blaze more brightly. Here he is in line with his masters, Augustine and Bernard, who were great lovers of God, or St. Paul, whose heart was not less absorbed and moulded by love for Jesus Christ. He found that "Jesus, the very thought of Thee with sweetness fills my breast" was not an aspiration but an experience. There is a lyric note in his love such as one finds in the hymn-books of the Church, those treasures of the heart's knowledge of Jesus. In the hymnology of the Church, theology is turned into music, its laws become songs. Benjamin Jowett has raised this question: "Is it possible to feel a personal attachment to Christ such as that described by Thomas à Kempis? I think that it is impossible, and contrary to human nature, that we should be able to concentrate our thoughts on a person scarcely known to us who lived 1,800 years ago."* But the facts are against

* *Life,* ii. 151.

Jowett. What he thinks impossible has been achieved, witness the experiences of the past and present: Christian love for Jesus is for One who is *the same yesterday, to-day and for ever.* "There are people who are ready, who are wishful, to endure the very worst for Christ, to help Him, to be with Him. I asked a man in the far south of India what he got out of his missionary life. He hesitated, and then said something like this: 'A sense of nearness to the Master!' At the heart of the Gospel is the assurance that Jesus is a Person to whom men get very near: they always could, He is so ready, so easy; He has such a knowledge of men and such sympathy with men."* Or, we may reply to Jowett as Granger has done in *The Soul of a Christian* by quoting "a canon laid down by Ritschl, 'It is one of the conditions of religious thought that what it contains in thought should be represented as present.'"† Or we may reply in the more familiar language of devotion that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to men as alive for evermore, that by His agency the past becomes present, the historical eternal, the inert vital: that He is the ever-abiding though invisible witness to Christ, taking of Him and making Him real to our hearts.‡ But *The Imitation* itself is the best answer, for the problem for Jowett and questioners like him is to explain the existence of such a book, remem-

* Glover, *Jesus in the Experience of Men*, p. 189.

† p. 191.

‡ Cf. Denney, *The Way Everlasting*, p. 151.

bering that à Kempis is only one of thousands, and that his experiences are backed for their reality and honesty by all who are within the Christian Faith. Christianity would long ago have sunk beyond recall had it not possessed the power to lift men out of themselves, out of their weaknesses and sins into power and purity and holy lives, out of aimless eddying about into a vocation.

IX

Holy Communion.

In many respects the Book—whether III. or IV. has already been discussed—on Holy Communion is the richest. Even Protestants of the Evangelical School find in it endless suggestions even whilst they demur to or reject the fundamental basis on which it is founded. They find in these eighteen chapters of dialogue between the Beloved and the disciple plenty that will enhance their own conception of this "life-giving feast," as Tennyson described it. As a stout son of the Reforming Faith sang, and taught many a Protestant to sing, "Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face." It is pre-eminently a service in which each receives, as he brings to the service. All will do well to give heed to these words of à Kempis:

> Beware of curious and unprofitable searching into this most profound Sacrament: if thou wilt not be plunged into

depths of doubt. He that pries into majesty: shall be overpowered by glory. God can work more: than man can understand (III. XVIII.).

It is possible we may have to reject the priestly function as ardently as Thomas would maintain it: reject what appears the grosser elements of its theory as Thomas would have insisted on them. It is possible to take a high view with the simplicity of an entirely spiritual faith. We may have our different opinions on matters of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and the like: but we can never afford to forget that Christ is the very Food and nourishment of Life, the "heavenly Manna." Even those who can dispense with the outer symbolism of the Lord's Supper can at least unite in such a prayer as this:

> Oh that with Thy Presence Thou wouldest wholly kindle, burn, and transform me unto Thyself: that I might be made one spirit with Thee by the grace of inward union: and the melting of ardent love. Suffer me not to go away from Thee hungry and dry: but deal mercifully with me: as oftentimes Thou hast dealt wonderfully with Thy saints (III. XVI.). Oh that it were granted me, Lord, to find Thee alone and open unto Thee my whole heart: and enjoy Thee as my soul desires: and that henceforth none may despise me, nor any creature attract nor regard me: but that

> Thou alone mayest speak unto me and I to Thee: as the beloved is wont to speak to his beloved, and friend to feast with friend (III. XIII.).

Nowhere in *The Imitation* have we theological discussions giving rise to disputes, but everywhere the book rises to the bracing air of the hills of God above the plains where opinions clash. All is of the grace of God and all is open to the devout soul that in simplicity of faith will seek Jesus. We are summoned, not to a copying of an external example, but to the partaking of a life which, bringing strength, subdues to the resemblance of its own supreme nature. As John Newton sang:

> As the image in the glass
> Answers the beholder's face,
> Thus unto my heart appear,
> Print Thine own resemblance there.

> Let Him come to me His poor one: and make me glad. Let Him put forth His hand: and save a poor wretch from every difficulty. Come, come: for without Thee no day nor hour is joyful: for Thou art my joy and without Thee my table is empty (IV. XXI. ii.).

This is the very core of the book: union that brings likeness, fellowship that brings such a way of sharing Jesus' outlook on life that we are drawn to walk as He walked and to carry on the work which *Jesus began by doing and*

teaching. It is a union which renews the nature of the disciple and issues, not only in walking after Him, but also likeness to Him, so that He becomes known to the world through His disciples and the world marks from their "life and manners" that they have been *with Jesus and have learnt of Him*. When Dr. Forsyth in *Christ on Parnassus* is comparing Greek and Gothic architecture, "the square, self-contained, and sprightly temple of Greece" with "the eternal hope and aspiration" which "speaks forth in every line and curve of Gothic architecture . . . the lovely symbol of man's thirst for the infinite . . . it utters man's dissatisfaction with himself and expresses his rest and peace to be only in God," he adds: "It is the soul of the *Imitation* projected in stone."* The infinite variety of Gothic is indeed an apt reminder that the disciples of Jesus express the likeness of their Master with manifold differences—never according to one rule; one is never the exact replica of another, but they are of the same "style." We are not to be "little Christs," but we are to be *in Him*: we are not to be duplicates, but fresh incarnations of His life as He is *formed* within us.

* p. 182.

CHAPTER V

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST": SOME CRITICISMS, JUST AND UNJUST

"Christendom must constantly go on to learn, that even in religion the simplest thing is the most difficult, and that everything that is a burden on religion quenches its seriousness ('a Christian man's business is not to talk grandly about dogmas, but to be always doing arduous and great things in fellowship with God': Zwingli). Therefore the goal of all Christian work, even all theological work, can only be this—to discern ever more distinctly the simplicity and seriousness of the Gospel, in order to become ever purer and stronger in *spirit*, and ever more loving and brotherly in *action*."—*Last sentence of* HARNACK'S *History of Dogma*, vii., p. 274.

THE most general and obvious criticism directed against *The Imitation* is that the writer was a monk, and therefore the air of the cloisters pervades its pages. To some, as to George Eliot, this is an attraction, to others it is a bias in the wrong direction. Whilst frankly acknowledging the bias, it may be worth while to mark more exactly the essential elements of the monkish ideals of the religious life: elements that are eternally true and worth preserving. It may be a kind of hothouse piety, carefully secluded from the chill blasts and tempests of the open field; but even in hothouses some flowers

bloom which cannot grow out in the open. It is almost waste of time to discuss the relative merits of the Contemplative and the Active life, the Mary and Martha aspects, for the world needs both, and the individual himself must have both in the smaller world of his own life. We cannot live them singly without serious loss. Thomas à Kempis exhibits something of the beauty of the Contemplative life and the loss it suffers when disjoined from that of the business of the world. The Reformation period, in its reaction from the monastic theories of religion, suffered from swinging too far towards the Active: and the daughter-churches of the Reformation have never sufficiently insisted on the culture of the soul. The Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century made an effort to compound the two into one, witness Charles Wesley's lines:

> Serve with careful Martha's hands,
> And loving Mary's heart!

Or two other lines:

> My hands are but engaged below:
> My heart is still with Thee.

Thomas à Kempis was not ignorant of this double call, for he wrote a little treatise, *De fideli dispensatore*, parts of which English readers may find in S. H. Gem's most interesting little book, called *Hidden Saints*.

Although the part of Mary is more eligible and sweeter, yet the laborious part

> of Martha, her sister, is praiseworthy and accepted of God; . . . to serve belongs especially to Martha, as to be at leisure belongs to Mary. Yet these two sisters are not to be separate from each other, nor should they contend as to the respective merits of their conditions. It should rather be their effort equally to receive Christ as their guest, that in all things they may stand perfectly, and advance in daily increasing virtue.*

There is ample justification for Dr. C. Bigg when he pleads that the world needs "reservoirs of every kind of excellence, of intelligence, of knowledge, of practical ability, of morality. No man is sufficient for himself. At every turn he must borrow, and he must lend. The contemplative life is such a reservoir, a storage ground of moral force."† The streams which cleanse and sweeten the muddy waters of life have their springs in the highlands of Contemplation and Prayer.

> It is the way the Master went:
> Should not the servant tread it still?

We allow scholars, scientists, artists, to live apart from the main current of affairs that they may be undistracted in the pursuit of their aim, and we do not condemn them. The religious man, if he pleads the same exemption from the responsibilities for the upkeep of the

* p. 193 *f.* † p. xxxvi.

fabric of civilization, is often condemned as idle and futile. Of course, he is not idle in reality, and the monks were generally not allowed to be idle in any sense. Many of them were great scholars, great artists, great schoolmasters. At Zwolle they were maintaining the knowledge of the world by their diligence in copying MSS. Life was hedged round with duties in the small world of the cloister. And they were single-hearted in their ambition to glorify God, to see the vision of His Face and find union with Him.

Yet we feel the monastic life stands condemned in its withdrawal from the world. Is the world to be left to take care of itself? To do so is to hand it over to the devil right away. The Gospel summoned its followers to be salt and light, instead of allowing it to corrupt and darken itself. The monks fled when they ought to have faced the more difficult task of rightly using the world, and converting it to the Christian way of life. To withdraw from the world is to cease to co-operate with God in its regeneration, and to fail to be His helpers in fulfilling His purpose in civilization, in politics and the arts of life. The watchword must be that Jesus is to be King over all things, so that all work be done as part of His service and for His glory.

But the task will tax every resource that the Christian Church has; and least of all dare she forsake the channels by which the Spirit of God can come forth in power to make her members radiant in strength. Her life's sources are *hid with Christ in God*. Hudson Taylor's vision of

himself as a vessel through whom God was waiting to pour forth His grace is a truth the Church needs to see and every disciple of Jesus needs to take to heart. We have two hands that one may clasp God and the other our fellow-men, that thus there may be contact with Him through us.

In thinking like this we assume that we have passed beyond the monastic ideal of the Middle Ages and feel how justified Dr. Hastings Rashdall is when he points out that there has been a continuous development in Christian thought as it has had to face the problems of the world, and that that development is the result of the work of the Divine Spirit. "The ideal of Thomas à Kempis was very unlike the ideal of Jesus—much more so than the ideal of the best modern Christianity."* But to reject the ideal set before us in *The Imitation*, to forget the mighty influence it has had over men who were engaged in great conflict with the world's evil, in politics like Gladstone, in soldiering like Gordon, is to miss the stimulus they found in its pages: for however far short we may feel the book falls of New Testament Christianity, it still possesses this power of directing its readers into the very Presence of Jesus and lifting them into the eternal order of things. It was written before the Reformation and before Luther had broken with the traditional portrait of the saint. To us moderns Luther is far more a saint of the New Testament type than Thomas—Luther with

* *Christ and Conscience*, p. 218.

his bold humour, his hearty laughter, his home, his desire to bring the Kingdom of God into being as a force in worldly affairs. The gloomy, pessimistic view of life in some pages of *The Imitation* is impossible for us.

> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

But in seeking power to balance the care of our souls with service to the world, the love of God and love of neighbour, the retreat from the world that we may be able to be of greater use to the world, there is that in Thomas à Kempis which cannot fail to help us to preserve the true equilibrium of interests.

Following the line of this criticism there are two others by Milman in his *Latin Christianity*,* and W. M. Thackeray in his *Letters*.† Milman describes the book, whilst admitting that it "supplies some imperious want in the Christianity of mankind," as "absolutely and entirely selfish in its aim," "begins in self—terminates in self." But this is not fair nor just, for à Kempis certainly included service for the community (I. XIX.), the good of others rather than doing one's own will (I. XV.), as part of the life he depicted; and what about such a sentence as this?

> If thou wilt be carried, carry also another (II. III.).

* *Latin Christianity*, IX. 163 *f.*
† *Letters of W. M. Thackeray*, p. 96.

It may be he had not attained to our modern interpretation of the law, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*, for, as Benjamin Kidd says, it is the expanding application of the word "neighbour" that reveals the development of the ethics of mankind.* Thomas was not ahead of his times in this extension of the law: he accepted the limitations of the monastery. But it is clear that his ideal was not so selfish as Milman would have us think. Thackeray's criticism has less ground than Milman's when he says that the book would create "a set of selfish beings, crawling about, avoiding one another, and howling a perpetual *Miserere*." But does it? John Wesley might be taken as one upon whom *The Imitation* exercised a wonderful effect, for he certainly drew from its pages continual guidance, and as certainly he never "crawled about" or "howled a perpetual *Miserere*," but lived one of the most selfless, cheerful, useful lives of any man of his generation. Apply the pragmatic test, *By their fruits ye shall know them*, and the book's influence has at least the evidence often suggested in these pages. Has ever anyone claimed that it is a full Christianity or that it is a complete presentation of Jesus? But whenever men seek to warm their hearts with the love of Jesus, or need incentives to deny self, to carry the cross manfully, to be self-forgetful, they will hear the call in these pages and bless God for His prophet, Thomas à Kempis.

* Art. "Civilization," *E.R.E.*

A far more damaging criticism is made when it is suggested that *The Imitation* reveals no historic sense. Though we ought not in fairness to ask from a man more than he can give us, it nevertheless militates against its serviceableness. "He constructs," so Dr. Stalker says, "Christ out of his own notions of excellence, instead of going to the records of His life and painting the portrait with the colours they supply." Dr. Stalker has in his well-known book, *Imago Christi*, sought to supply this lack, and has traced the portrait of the Master in varying aspects—sixteen in all—as a Friend, Worker, Sufferer, Evangelist, Teacher, in the Home, the State, the Church, and so on.* This method, however suggestive, can never be fully adequate, for it is always open to say that the external actions of Jesus only expressed His mind for His own day, and that in other times and other days and other lands He might have expressed His mind and heart quite differently and even in quite opposite a fashion. And the method is exposed to Dr. Oman's criticism that we do not possess an encyclopædic knowledge of Jesus: but taken as far as we can go, probably no reader rises from *Imago Christi* without receiving the elevation of heart that all contact with Jesus brings. On the other hand, it is true to say that what records we have of the earthly life of Jesus are sufficient for us to know

* p. 24 *f.*; cf. Stalker's *Ethic of Jesus*, p. 197 *f.*; cf. also Caroline Fox, *Christ our Example*, and Upham *The Hidden Life*, ii. 13, for other illustrations.

His mind. As the geologist from a single bone can reconstruct the form of a prehistoric animal, so from a few incidents it is possible often to reconstruct the mind of past characters, though it never can be done without an element of uncertainty. Thus the saying, *Consider the lilies,* opens a window into Jesus' mind that suggests He appreciated floral beauty, and if floral, then beauty in every form, and that He possessed the æsthetic sense. Nevertheless, Dr. Stalker's charge that Christ as portrayed by à Kempis is not the Jesus of the Gospels is reaffirmed by Dr. Hastings Rashdall, who strongly asserts, "The Christ of whom we hear so much in the *Imitatio* has not very much in common with the Christ of the Gospels";* though Dr. Stalker sees also that à Kempis has some instinct or power that with a glowing love and a soaring reverence do indeed bring Christ home to the heart. To this the reply might be made that it seems odd that the generations of readers of *The Imitation* should not have discovered the discrepancy that Dr. Rashdall says exists. Unless, indeed, the explanation be that the readers of à Kempis, like à Kempis himself, approached Jesus rather through the creeds of the Church than through the Gospels treated as historical documents. It is true that never since the Apostles' days have such efforts been made to see Jesus apart from the doctrines framed concerning His Person. The multitudinous Lives of Christ have often brought

* *Christ and Conscience,* p. 220.

out lineaments of His Character obscured in earlier centuries, and the final Life has yet to be written. Just as none of us is ever satisfied with the painters' attempts to give His portrait, so few of us are content with the most accurate Life written hitherto. His Face must have been more wonderful than any artist has put upon canvas, and He is still in a sense the great Enigma for biographers: we label Him, but He escapes our classification; He was "over the heads of His reporters," and He is over the heads of His critics to-day; every biographer sees Him from some aspect which is valuable; and in the words of Thomas Hodgkin, historian, banker, and Quaker, we may say "that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, speaks to us with an even more powerful and heart-satisfying voice than He has done for many past generations."* Orthodoxy, in its anxiety to preserve the creeds concerning the Perfect Godhead, has often tended to hide the Perfect Manhood in the Incarnation. And we have a singular evidence of this in the storm that met *Ecce Homo* on its publication: yet, as Dean Church said in his review of that great book, it was like a modern *Imitation*.

But the study of Jesus to which *The Imitation* calls us leads rather to the apostolic way of following Him than to a reproduction of the Gospel settings of His life. For Dr. Stalker himself says that the book "specifies, indeed, certain great features of the Saviour's history—

* *Life and Letters*, p. 336.

as, for instance, that in becoming man He humbled Himself, and therefore we ought to be humble: or that He lived a life of suffering, and therefore we ought to be willing to suffer; but he does not get beyond these generalities." But this can also be said concerning the apostolic teaching on following and imitating Christ. Thomas à Kempis' line of thought is rather theirs than of the modern historical school. Even if it can be proved that his vision of Jesus was somewhat defective, lacking some elements, does that prove it was not true? Does it not only prove that Jesus was too great for him? And that everyone who comes to Jesus, like the old legend of the statue of Jesus which enlarged itself as anyone approached it, finds that He is greater than his powers are to comprehend that mighty Figure? Everyone can agree with Dr. Stalker, "The imitation of Christ is a subject which is constantly calling for reconsideration." The aim of every Christian will always be to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.* One can almost hear the sincere, devout old monk saying to us as we discuss these things, "Away with your subtleties, your criticisms, your discussions: get on with your imitation of the Lord, love Him till you grow like Him, behold Him till you are transformed into the same image, as by the Lord the Spirit! Take what you can profit by, but get on!"

CHAPTER VI

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST": ITS PERMANENT VALUE

> For our joy and our health, Jesus Christ of heaven
> In poor man's apparel pursueth us ever.
> W. LANGLAND: *Piers Plowman.*

IT is always an ungracious task to point out the limitations of a masterwork of genius. *The Imitation* has proved of infinite value to souls in the past, and will continue "to work miracles" so long as it is read. "God has uses for lame men," says H. G. Wells somewhere, echoing George Eliot's thought that the work of the world has never been done by perfect men. God can use defective men and books. He

> doth not need
> Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best.

The value attached by some to *The Imitation* has indeed been extravagant and superstitious when they have used it as men of old used Vergil and the Scriptures, practising a kind of *sortes Vergilianæ*, opening the book at random and seeking guidance or comfort from the first words their eyes lighted upon. There is a very curious sentence in a letter of John Wesley,

dated 1764: "I went upstairs, and after a little prayer opened Kempis on these words: 'Wait on the Lord, quit thyself like a man. Yield not to distrust. Be unwilling to depart: but constantly expose body and soul for the Glory of God.'"* It does not appear that Wesley often practised this *sortes Kempisensis*, though we know both he and his friends adapted the habit to the Scriptures. The practice, of course, is evidence of the place that à Kempis had in his mind. But its real value lies elsewhere.

It has been said that part of the attraction lies in the title, for every lover of Jesus is drawn by his love to imitate his Lover. Certainly à Kempis has been fortunate in the translator who first selected the title. Who does not hear in *The Imitation of Christ* something that stirs the pulse and summons to the heights? Who would not be such a man if he could? The very title comes home right to our hearts and bosoms as the supreme aim of all character-building. It sums up the yearnings of many hearts. Its appeal pre-eminently is for love to Jesus, a love that readily suffers all things gladly for His sake, and seeks to discipline itself to His likeness.

The full and free use of the Scriptures accounts for a great part of its attractiveness, coupled as it is with the absence of any doctrinal basis. Whatever light theology, as the scientific statement of religion, may bring to the

* *Works*, iii. 171.

mind, it very seldom has warmth for the heart, and Thomas à Kempis shows himself impatient of theological hair-splitting. He never initiates a discussion, for he knows how often theological debate is fatal to the true spirit of devotion. The theological compendium may define sin, but seldom convicts of sin; may establish a doctrine of the Personality of Jesus without setting the heart ablaze with love. And we cannot doubt that the popularity of *The Imitation* is largely due to the absence from its pages of echoes of contending doctors. The language of *The Imitation* is the language of the heart, and there are more people who can understand that dialect than are competent to move in the regions of theology. Doubtless Thomas was duly trained himself in the ecclesiastical dogmas of his Church, for he was a priest; but he nowhere dresses himself as a rabbi of the schools: he remains a man who wishes to reach the people, not the experts. Even in the section on Holy Communion, where his teaching is of the sacramental and sacerdotal type, there is an aroma about it that suggests the devotion of the saint as he comes face to face with his Lord. Of course theology has its place in the scheme of things, since we must learn to think rightly and wisely about all things; but it is infinitely more important to follow Christ. The book accomplishes this in a way that proves it to be a work of spiritual genius. With the simplest art in the world we are brought to the feet of Jesus that we may hear Him speak and receive

gifts from Him. We may call the attitude of mind into which the book brings us what we will—mysticism, contemplation, imitation, assimilation, contact: it is assuredly something that leaves its mark upon us, and brings us to peace and insight and joy and love. It is then that we know, "His touch has still its ancient power," to make men whole, to give them vision, to make them anew and save them.

The Imitation possesses this power to introduce "the soul to Jesus and Jesus to the soul" in common with other books of similar purport. And so it stands as a witness—one amongst hundreds—of the affirmation that Jesus can be known, and that in the Godhead we can "see the Christ stand" opening the gates of life. It is difficult, very difficult, to explain how this assurance of His reality to the soul can be made a spiritual fact, though such He has been, and is still, to millions of men and women. But this spiritual fellowship, though difficult to define, is here in this little book beyond doubt. Christ was to Thomas à Kempis "closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet"; it was a fact that he walked and talked with Him, that he knew Christ does not lie dead "where the Syrian stars look down," but is the *Lord of Glory, alive for evermore.* He knew this fellowship with God in Christ in the loneliness of his cell, in hours of social worship; he knew it as an actual living experience. Explain all this as we may, we cannot doubt that he was as truthful as

he knew how to be, and that his four little treatises were begotten of such rich experience. He recognized that the union between his heart and Christ was not absorption, as some mystics have asserted, but a union in which he kept his own identity. It is in part because of this experimental side in his faith, and because he was blessed with a facile pen to set it forth, that the book has been of such inestimable worth to struggling souls, and holds its place still as one of the greatest to help wayfaring men struggling with self and sin.

In a very interesting book, Mr. Richard Roberts has shown how differently the Figure of Jesus has been viewed by men of varying temperament and genius. Thus, to Dante Christ is the glorified Redeemer, to Shelley the supreme Poet and Reformer, to Browning the Clue to the mystery of life, to Tennyson the Revealer of God and man, to Savonarola the Overlord of cities, and to Blake and Francis Thompson, to Mazzini and John Ruskin in other forms and categories. These all have a chapter each allotted to them, but he quotes others: Dostoievsky with his "Russian Christ": "There is in the world only one figure of absolute beauty: Christ"; and Bernard Shaw, who has written: "I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human life for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's Will if he had undertaken the work of a modern practical states-

man."* To these he might have added R. L. Stevenson, who missed Christ as a Poet and found Him as a Hero; or Oscar Wilde, who discovered Him as a Poet but never saw Him as a Saviour; or Carlyle, who saw in Christ "the noblest, brotherliest, and most heroic-minded Being that ever walked this earth." These might easily be increased in number by reviewing various aspects as represented by the great masters of art, who in colour or in sculpture have sought to express how Jesus appeared to them. For the wonderful thing about Jesus is that silently He invades everywhere. But in most of these there is little more than what may be called the external aspect of Jesus: however much they rebelled—and most of those named above were rebels, in some form or other, against the customs and codes of their own day—they instinctively bow their heads in His Presence. To few of them was Jesus more than an Example, but their reverence for Him was genuine enough so far as it went.

Mr. Roberts suggests, but does not carry out, a further line of comparison, the story of Jesus in the hearts of men, the story of what the Love and Presence of Jesus has done in the souls of His lovers, friends, disciples, or what we may call a comparative study of Christian experience in the saints of all ages—Augustine, Bernard,

* *Jesus of the Poets and Prophets*, pp. 22–44, 151; *cf.* Kelman's *R. L. Stevenson*, pp. 178, 88–92; Wilde's *De Profundis*; Holman Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, i. 355.

Luther, Fox, Wesley, Rutherford, Brother Lawrence. We have had psychological studies of conversion, of assurance, of sanctification; but this would be a study of the supreme Lord as known by His followers, to whom He has been the "Unknown Steersman" or the well-known Friend, the Saviour to the uttermost or the Lord of their lives. One fact would emerge from such a comparative study: Jesus was to them exactly what they needed; they got from Him what they sought, and received from Him according to their faith. To one He was the mighty Deliverer from some binding sinful habit, to another the Solution of their intellectual doubts, to another the Guide into the way of peace, to another who brought nothing but an empty heart Jesus became the All-in-all, as the different chambers of life had their doors opened for Him to enter in and possess. Dr. Glover has taken his own excellent way in dealing with *Jesus in the Experience of Men*, but this suggested study would be equally well named by the title of his book. We should then see that no one has ever grasped every side of the Master, but that it may take the whole range of mankind's mental and moral powers before He is fully known. To know him in His fulness is a pursuit as well as an attainment. He is the Universal Man, and it may well take a universe of lovers to understand Him. He is One in whom all types find their fulfilment, the Epitome of the World's Desire. We wait till the East shall have brought its contribution

to the study of Jesus, till the African has made clear the lineaments of the "Black Christ," of whom the Rhodesian missionary, A. S. Cripps, has written in some of his poems, till the men and women of every race, every temperament, every tradition have given in their contributions: then and only then shall something of the unparalleled glory of the Son of Man be seen. Then shall men see that Jesus is indeed *The Light of the World, The Way, the Truth, and the Life,* or, as Paul says, *Jesus is Lord* (1 Cor. xii. 3).

To this consensus of faith's assurances about Jesus, Thomas à Kempis made his contribution by setting forth the Lord as the Light, the Food, the Life of men, showing that in Him is satisfaction of the heart's longings to be found, that the Love of Jesus for souls awakens and sets on fire their devotion towards Himself and His work; that to know the *love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge* (Eph. iii. 19) is something for which the world may well be lost. It becomes "the master-light of all our seeing." It is a love which stimulates a responding love till that love seeks to walk along the same road with the Beloved and finds no ambition so masterful as that which longs to be like Him. There is no stronger motive than *the love of Christ, convinced that as One has died for all, then all have died, and that He died for all in order to have the living live no longer for themselves but for Him who died and rose again for them* (2 Cor. v. 15). Here is the heart of Thomas à Kempis' faith, and this is Chris-

tianity—love at the centre and love at the circumference. And this is what he helps us to experience, love bearing sweet fruits of peace, humility, purity, love standing in love's sacrifice, even the sacrifice of the Cross.

Dr. Rufus Jones says Thomas à Kempis' problem was "to find a different self";* a self more worthy for the habitation of Jesus and more fitted for the expression of his experience of Jesus' love: he knew that his and every man's problem lies within: and he knew that Christ within was as essential as Christ without. He found that Christ within means

> Central peace, subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation.

> Oh that with Thy Presence Thou wouldest wholly kindle, burn, transform me into Thyself: that I might be made one spirit with Thee by the grace of inward union: and the melting of ardent love (III. XVI.). Join Thou me to Thyself with an inseparable band of love: for Thou alone canst satisfy him that longeth: and without Thee all things are futile (IV. XXIII.).

Thus Thomas à Kempis looked to Jesus to create a new image within him, an image resembling his Lord, in which his mind, heart, and will would be renewed. He found it through Christ dwelling within, transforming,

* *Studies in Mystical Religion*, p. 328.

illuminating, strengthening, just as Charles Wesley found it:

> When Jesus makes my heart His home
> My sin shall all depart:
> And lo! He saith, I quickly come
> To fill and rule thy heart.

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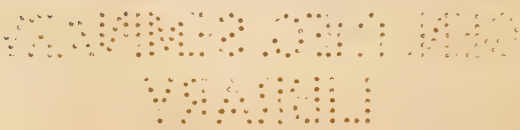

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